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COMMON PEOPLE



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by

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PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Pel Pelham	- - - - -	A spruiker
Skin Rogers	- - - - -	A bookmaker
Rena Maroni	- - - - -	A trapeze artist
Sapolio	- - - - -	A fasting man
Marie	- - - - -	His wife
Bella	- - - - -	A tattooed lady
Salvi	- - - - -	A sword-walker
Estelle	- - - - -	An armless wonder
Dan Carey	- - - - -	A carnival man
Joseph Rorke	- - - - -	A plain-clothes man
Linley	- - - - -	A detective
Ricketty	- - - - -	A tramp
Paul Maroni	- - - - -	A circus proprietor
Micklewitz	- - - - -	A midget
Wang	- - - - -	A giant

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COMMON PEOPLE

CHAPTER ONE

THE garage was at the end of the straggling street. It was a hot day, and the garage man rose listlessly as the strange car drove in. He scarcely noticed the driver, but he heard his "Fill her up!" While she was filling he wiped his perspiring forehead, brushing the lock of grey hair away from his eyes. He disconnected the hose and screwed up the petrol cap, and saw the shadow of the man on the baked, sunlit ground.

"That'll be——" he began.

"That'll be nothing," the car driver interrupted.

The garage man looked up into the eyes of a big fellow, well-knit, good-looking in his way, not over young, certainly not old. He was smiling, but not pleasantly.

"Well, if it isn't old Barney," he said, but there was no affability in his voice.

The garage man's eyes shifted. "Oh, it's you," he said.

The other pulled out a cigar. He bit off the end and spat it out. He talked as he lit up. "Been making some inquiries, Barney," he said. "People like you. They say 'Old Barney this', and 'Old Barney that'. You're quite popular. No accounting for tastes, eh? Some like this, some like that."

He threw the match away, and gazed about him. "My, my! Quite a place you have here!"

Barney said, "It just gets through."

The other made a reproving sound. "Tut, tut!" he said. "You mustn't be so modest. But I'm not surprised they like you. You've got taking ways." The garage man's eyes flickered, but he said nothing, and the other went on, "And they say you're a man of your word—as" (he gave a little bow) "I've always found you—so far."

From a pitcher on a bench near by he poured himself a glass of water. "Well," he said, "here's to crime!"

He made an expression of distaste as he finished the drink. He put the glass back on the bench, and climbed leisurely into the car. As it moved off he leaned out and called, "Good-bye, Barney! Don't forget to write!"

The big car ran smoothly along the hot country road. The houses clung together for a while, then, abruptly, there were no more. The driver hummed a slow waltz air.

By and by the road met and ran parallel with the railway line, continuing monotonously for miles. There was neither habitation nor sign of life, but occasionally, narrow sidetracks—coming from heaven knows where—joined the main thoroughfare. Presently the driver of the big car came within view of a small railway station. It was an unattended siding, and train travellers

desirous of alighting there had to be sure to inform the guard in good time.

The more dignified trains never thought of stopping under any circumstances. People who wished to get aboard a train at the siding had to use a staff provided for the purpose, and wave it frantically, otherwise the locomotive would rush by, its funnel disdainfully high, its steam valve snorting contempt.

The man in the car glanced casually at the little station, and at the big sign, out of all proportion to its importance, which cried its name vainly to a disinterested world. He slowed down. There was a girl on the platform—a young girl, a nicely shaped girl, a girl definitely worth stopping for even at this pathetic little siding, a girl worth inquiring about. She held the staff in her hand, and there was a suitcase at her feet.

The man pulled up, got out of the car, and joined her. He saw that she was a good-looking girl, and he knew at once that she had been crying.

He did not raise his hat, but nodded at the staff. "What's the bright idea?" he asked.

She eyed him suspiciously. "I thought everyone knew that," she returned.

"One might swat the flies with it," he said, "but it's practically useless for stopping trains—to-day, anyway."

Her eyes looked inquiry.

"My dear girl," he said, "a little attention to detail, and you'd save yourself a lot of trouble.

Now, let me show you. I deduce you are desirous of going south?"

She nodded.

"Come here!" he said. There was a peremptory note in his voice, but she was too curious, too anxious about her train connexion to notice. She walked with him to the centre of the platform, still carrying the staff. Under the narrow veranda, which at that moment was no shelter whatever from the blazing sun, a large timetable was pasted on a blackboard. The man ran his finger down the list of stations until he found the name of the siding.

"Here we are," he said. "The train comes tearing past here at 11.10." He took out his watch. "It is now 11.5. But no train will hurtle past."

"Why?"

"Why, my dear girl! Because of this pesky little asterisk at the very top of the column. For meaning of asterisk, see bottom of column." He pointed, and read, "'Except Tuesdays and Fridays'. This is Tuesday. So you see, if you are determined to catch a train at this siding, you will have almost exactly twenty-four hours to wait. You'd be burnt up."

He took the staff from her hand, and replaced it on the rack under the veranda. He picked up her suitcase. "Come on!" he said, pointing. "There's my car."

The little, plump man sitting beneath a tree on the side of the road opposite the station had

heard nothing but seen all. He was a person of no consequence. He wore an old and battered hat. He had no coat, and a ragged belt held up shapeless, patched trousers.

When the car had disappeared he rose slowly, stretched his arms, and yawned. He threw a swag over his shoulder and began to move slowly in the opposite direction, walking with a limp, as a man who had gone far on tired feet.

It was nearly one in the afternoon when he stood watching a huge hulk of a man in pants and singlet, cooking over an open fire outside a tent. A number of other tents were scattered around, and, a little distance away, there was a big round canvas top with the sidewalls drawn up. The tramp could see the tent poles within, and a circle of rough seating round a ring in which a man was exercising a horse.

The man who was cooking said, "Lookin' for work?"

The tramp sniffed the mess in the large frying-pan. "Depen's," he said, cautiously. "I ain't much use at hard yacker." He thrust out a twisted foot. "Infantile paralysis," he explained—"ever since I was a kid."

"Could you cook for this outfit?"

The plump tramp looked about him curiously. He was slightly contemptuous. "All *they'd* need, I guess."

"You can stay. You'll get your tucker. Anything else depends on the cooking."

A small, grey-headed man emerged from one of the smaller tents. "Returned yet, Blake?" he called.

"No sign, boss. She'll be back."

"Who said she wouldn't?" He strode back into the tent.

The tramp's black eyes were interested. "Who's he lookin' for?" he asked. "I seen a girl—"

Blake interrupted. "Where?"

"I seen her on the Billiga sidin'. Good-lookin' piece. With a suitcase. She was waitin' for a train."

Blake thought a moment. "Come on!" he said, and led the tramp to the boss's tent. "I think this chap seen her, Mr Maroni," he said, pushing the other forward.

The tramp took off his hat.

"All right, Blake," Maroni said. It was dismissal.

"I seen her on the Billiga sidin'," the tramp remarked. "With a suitcase. Waitin' for the train. I thought it was funny."

"*You* thought it was funny?" Maroni said, and fixed him with a baleful eye. "What's funny about a girl waiting on a station?"

The tramp shuffled apologetically. "Well," he said, "there ain't no train stops at that sidin' to-day, and there was another thing seemed funny, too."

"Well?"

"One minute," the tramp said, "she was there on her ownsome, and then along comes a feller

in a big car and chats with her—oh, very polite—and off they goes in his motor.”

The circus man’s lips set in a hard line. Under bushy white brows steely eyes glared at the tramp as if daring him to continue.

“He took her suitcase and off they druv,” the tramp concluded, uncomfortably, and stood twisting his shabby hat.

Maroni turned his head away, and gazed through the tent entrance over and beyond the big top. At last he looked at the tramp again. “What’s your name?”

“They call me Ricketty.” He thrust out a crippled foot.

“You can hang about. Blake’ll give you something to do.”

“Thanks, boss.”

He was leaving when Maroni said, “Just a minute. You saw the girl on the siding waiting for a train?”

Ricketty nodded.

The boss pointed to an elephant standing in the shade of a huge gum some distance away. “You saw her on the siding waiting for a train,” he repeated, “and that’s all you saw. If you tell another living soul that she went off in a car with—that you saw her anywhere, any time, except standing *alone* on the platform, I’ll have that animal trample you. Understand?”

The tramp limped off, glad to be out of range of those baleful eyes.

Maroni stood at his tent entrance and bawled, "Salvi."

A lean, curly-headed man, barefooted, and wearing singlet and trousers, emerged from a dressing-tent, wiping his dripping face with a coloured towel. "Yes, boss."

"You'll do your single trapeze to-night. Miss Maroni won't be here."

"Rena gone?"

The little man glared. "I said *Miss* Maroni won't be here."

Salvi nodded hastily. "I see," he said, but his eyes looked puzzled as he turned to go.

Maroni called after him, "Get the band to give you some new music."

"Re— Miss Maroni's 'll do."

Maroni's face was livid. "I said get some *new* music," he said.

Pelham, his lean face newly shaved, walked briskly, for winter was not far off and there was a nip in the air, though it was not yet cold enough for a topcoat. He wore a pin-spot suit, a gay bit of handkerchief lolling from the breast pocket. His hat, obviously new, was correctly creased, and worn at a jaunty angle, his tan shoes closely fitted his tiny feet, and he carried a cane and gloves.

But clever people who know these things would have discerned at once that Pelham was not a "gentleman". There was nothing of the "old school tie" about him. His eyes had no serene

certainty, but darted hither and thither as he walked. He had nothing of that air of calmness with which men with public-school backing can move about the world as certain of lunch and dinner as of Christmas. No, Pelham, for all his sartorial splendour, was not a gentleman.

How could he be? Somewhere in the world, perhaps, he had a father. When he was quite a little chap, at rare intervals he would go with the other children from the Home for little outings into the busy world of big people, and at such moments his eager young eyes would dwell on the hundreds of hurrying, preoccupied men. One of these, he imagined, must be his father.

He knew he had a mother, of course. He was rather proud of that, and boasted to the kids about her, adding bits and pieces to the vague particulars he had gleaned from the kind, fat lady visitor who had given him some sweets.

Ricketty was the first boy he told about his mother's romantic career, and Ricketty was so fascinated that he hobbled off and told the others, so that it was not long before Pel found himself the centre of a group of eager, gossip-hungry orphans.

"Go on, Pel," Ricketty urged, "tell 'em about your mum—about her being a princess and all."

Skinny Rogers said, "Gee, I bet she weren't no princess."

"She was that," Ricketty asserted. "Tell 'em, Pel."

Pelham regarded the dissenter without rancour. "Look, Skin," he said, carefully, "I don't know for sure. P'raps she weren't no princess, but it's funny. It's all mysterious like."

He had their interest. It became his job to hold it, and he told his story, not aggressively, not boastfully, but as one in awe, only half believing himself, taking them into his confidence.

It was a vividly imaginative story, with a dashing young army officer—his father—wooing and winning a beautiful but mysterious European princess—his mother—and it ended tragically in their both being burnt to death.

"Gee, that was tough," Slim said awkwardly, and the other boys shuffled uneasily. Some of them could remember besotted fathers and dirty, dishevelled mothers with raucous voices and heavy hands, but none could conceive a greater tragedy than Pel's.

"Don't talk about it no more," Pel said, blowing his nose loudly into his handkerchief.

Later, the matron had a word with young Pelham. "Do you know what happens to little boys who tell lies?" she asked.

Pel knew the answer to that one, but he didn't believe it. He hung his head.

"You were overheard telling the children about your mother being—a princess, wasn't it?"

Pel did not speak.

"You know that is not true, don't you? . . . Don't you?"

He nodded, glumly.

“Why do you tell untruths?”

Pel looked up, mutiny in his eyes. “Because I don’t know what else to tell,” he cried, passionately. “I don’t know ’bout my mother. Who was my mum? If she wasn’t a princess, what was she? Tell me what she was—*please!*”

The matron’s mouth fell open a little at the sudden outburst, and a slow flush spread over her face. “Why—” she began, and hesitated.

“See?” Pel cried. “You see? You won’t tell me. Nobody won’t tell me. You don’t *want* to tell me!” His little fists clenched, and his hands shook, while his head moved from side to side in a gesture of impatience and impotence. “Oh, I bet my made-up mother’s better than the one you won’t tell about,” he cried, and burst into tears. “Why can’t you let me be?”

CHAPTER TWO

PELHAM paused outside a shop devoting its life to men's wear, took out a case, selected a cigarette and carefully lit it, while he considered the merits of a red tie with yellow spots. As he threw the match away, a man spoke.

"Well, if it ain't little Pel! And all dressed up, and no place to go."

Pelham carefully replaced the cigarette case in his pocket, inhaled, and let the smoke trickle back through his nostril before he replied. "Wrong again, Mr Rorke."

"Don't tell me you're going to work." Rorke pushed his hat back from his forehead. He stood towering above Pel, grinning.

"You'll be hearing me," Pelham said, quietly, considering the tip of his cigarette.

"I suppose," Rorke said, still grinning, "it wouldn't be etiquette to ask the nature of this job?"

"Sure," Pel responded. "Why not? The more that know the better. I'd like you to spread the news."

With long fingers he fished in his vest pocket, and produced a card. He handed it to Rorke, who held it, both hands extended, his eye focusing the tiny print. The plain-clothes man read aloud,

MONSIEUR SAPOLIO,
World's Champion Fasting Man
Pel Pelham, Representative.

"Well, well!" Rorke commented. "Ain't that nice? I notice it don't say anything about Pel Pelham starving."

The flicker of a smile passed over Pel's face. "No, sir!" he said, and continued in serious vein, "Look here, Rorke, why can't you let me be? What have I done to you? This thing's on the level. It's all on the up and up. I'm dealing with some nice people."

"Says you." Rorke's tone irritated.

"Everything I've ever done's been on the level," Pelham said, sharply.

"Says you again."

"Says I," Pelham retorted. "You've got the wrong angle. Everywhere you look you see a crook."

Rorke stared him straight in the eye. "So you do," he said softly. "So you do."

"Now, that's rude, Mr. Rorke." Pelham turned to go. "But you can't make me cross. So long!"

"So long," Rorke said, slowly. "See you in court."

Pelham looked over his shoulder. "Not in these trousers," he said, and gestured good-bye with his hand. The fingers were outstretched, and his thumb was suspiciously near his nose. But nobody could have sworn that Pelham meant what Rorke knew he meant.

Pelham jumped on a tram and rode one section, alighted, walked a block, turned down a narrow side-street, and entered a small apartment house.

There was no lift, and he climbed two flights and knocked on a door. When it opened a fat woman beamed at him, beckoning him inside.

"Eet is M'sieur Pel," she called to someone in an inner room. "Bon jour! Come inside. Your chapeau, please." She raised her voice. "Henri, eet is M'sieur Pel."

A stockily built man, without coat or vest, emerged from another room, a newspaper dangling from his hand. Big mournful eyes peered over rimless spectacles. "Ah, mon ami!" he cried. "Bon jour, bon jour!"

"Bon jour," Pel said gravely, and accepted the chair the woman had industriously dusted.

"You have news, eh? Good news?" she asked.

Pel pursed his lips. "Yes and no," he said.

The woman looked inquiringly at her husband. "What is zis yes and no?" she asked.

Pel, always restless, rose, and took out his cigarette case. He offered it to the woman, but she shook her head. The man accepted. As he lit the other's cigarette Pel said, "It's like this, Sapolio. I got a shop. Good site. Just right for the tomb. We'll collect the dough there all right, but—"

"But—?" It was the woman again.

"But," Pel went on, "they want the rent in advance—ten weeks at fifteen pounds per week."

"One 'undred and fifty. Eet is too much," the woman cried. "In Paree we pay nozzing like. Even in 'Amburg, where they is all brigand, we do not pay like zis."

Pel said, "Whether it's too high or not, we haven't got a hundred and fifty. You haven't got it, Marie. Sapolio hasn't got it. I haven't got it."

"But, M'sieur Pel," the woman cried, "Henri mus' work. Eef 'e don' starve soon, 'ow we going to eat? Tell me zat."

Sapolio turned mournful eyes upon his wife. "You see, Marie?" he said, rebuking. "Don' I tell you? You should save." He turned his attention to Pel. "Eet is always the same. Ev'ry time I finish zee fast she say, 'Ah, poor man, I buy 'im plenty food. 'E mus' 'ave peekels an' ploods in bottels, an' rosbif, *and* gateaux. Gateaux, by the 'undred an' t'ousand. I, Henri Sapolio, don't like gateaux, but she like les gateaux. She spen' money like it was water, and what she get? Indigestion! Embonpoint! But we 'ave no money. *Non!*"

As he spoke, the fat woman's face worked convulsively. Two or three times, as she tried to speak, Pelham looked at her apprehensively. When her husband finished, she exploded in a torrent of French. Then she turned to Pel.

"Listen! Listen at 'im! You see, m'sieur—you see what I get when I marry zis starving man. You see what I get when I make marriage wiz zis low fellow. When 'e comes from zee world-champion fast, do I let 'im to die? Do I? Non. I cook for 'im. I feed 'im. I make 'im zee potage. I slave in zee cuisine. Day an' night I cook, cook, cook, till zee crazy skeleton 'e get

back 'is flesh on 'is bone. An, now, what do 'e say?

"He say, m'sieur, I fling away zee franc. I pour zee money in zee dustbag. I get indigestion! I, Marie Matisse, whose poppa was chef at Le Cafe Bul Bul—I get indigestion? *Psaugh!*" She ended suddenly, with a violent hiccup.

Pel put out a restraining hand and patted her sleeve. "Now, now, Marie," he pleaded. "Listen! And you, too, Henri."

He sat down again, and they took chairs on either side of him. "I'm going to see a man I know, and I'm going to ask him to advance the money."

"'E is good frien' to you, yes?" Marie asked.

Pel coughed. "We went to the same school," he said.

"Ah, you are college chum?" Sapolio cried. "Ol' school tie, eh? You get zee money. What I tell you, Marie? Pel get zee money zis afternoon."

"Bon." Marie rose, as if everything were settled. She produced bottle and glasses. "Eet is all fix then. Pel, we drink to your college tie frien'."

"It isn't all fixed," Pelham warned them as he took his tiny glass. "He might refuse."

"'E won' agree?" Marie cried, hotly. "What sort of frien' is zis who won' agree?"

"It's a lot of money," Pel said, dubiously.

"But we pay 'im back," Sapolio said.

"Of course, of course," Pel agreed. "I know that. But he might want a cut."

Marie understood this all right. "You mean 'e give you one 'undred and fifty an' 'as the percentage?"

Pel nodded.

"What percentage?" she asked, warily.

"Oh, I dunno," Pel said. "I'll make it as reasonable as possible."

Sapolio shook his head slowly, and his big, cow-like eyes gazed sadly at the other man. "I make zee starve," he lamented. "Day after day I stay in zee glass 'ouse. I 'ave nozzing in me for eight, nine, ten week—an' zis college man, 'e take zee cut. Ev'ry night 'e take zee cut an' go 'ome to 'is big fat dinner wiz 'is big, fat wife an' smoke 'is big fat cigar, an' poor Sapolio stay in 'is living tomb, starving, at zee door of dead men." He picked up a corner of the table-cloth and wiped his eye.

Marie snatched it from him. "Close your trap. You are not doing zee spruik. Maybe M'sieur Pel 'e get college frien' to len' zee money, eh?"

"Maybe," Pelham said. "I'll let you know. He's a good guy. But I never asked him for anything in my life, and—Anyhow, wish me luck!"

Marie picked up his hat and placed it on his head. She fingered the handkerchief at his breast pocket. "My," she said, smiling, "you look fine gentleman. I bet you fix everyt'ing."

"I'll try."

"You see," Marie said, turning to her husband, "Pel 'e fix. Then, poppa, you start starve again and everybody's havin' fun, yes?"

Pelham entered the Jockey Club, and asked at the inquiry desk for Mr Rogers. In a few moments a page boy told him to follow. Rogers was in the bar.

"Hello, Pel," he said. "Have a drink?"

"Thanks, Mr Rogers."

The tall, slim man gripped the other's shoulder. "Where d'you get this mister stuff?"

"It's like this, Skin," Pelham said, "I've come begging."

"Broke?" Rogers' hand was in his pocket. "You don't look it. My!" He looked Pel up and down. "Bond Street and all that, eh?"

"It's an investment," Pel explained.

"Sure, sure." Rogers nodded. "If you're not in the dough, look swell. If you are, it don't matter." He drank. "Fact is, Pel, I've often wondered why you've never asked me to help out. I got plenty, you know, and there's always more."

Pel fingered his glass. "Oh, I've managed," he said.

"Good boy." Rogers signed to the barman to replenish. "Married, ain'tcha?"

"Yep."

"Kids?"

"One."

"That's the stuff. I'm getting married myself soon."

"No! Well, here's to you both, Skin."

"Thanks, Pel. She's some girl."

"You bet. Ain't they all?"

Rogers laughed, then his brow clouded. "Say, Pel, there's somethin' you could do for me if you would?"

"Anything you say."

"It's ticklish. It's like this, Pel." He drew the other away from the bar and continued confidentially. "There's a girl I knew—kind of. You know how it is. We were having fun. But it didn't mean a thing to me. Or to her either. But now she's pretending it did. Wait a bit. I'll show you."

He felt in his pocket and produced a square envelope from which he took a piece of pink note-paper. He handed it to Pel, who read the few words:

You've got it. Why shouldn't *I* have it? This is to warn you I expect it and want to hear from you soon.

Pel's lips pursed. "Meanin' it's blackmail?" he asked.

Skin nodded. "I never heard a word till someone wrote a paragraph in the papers about me and Susan—that's the girl I'm marrying. I've been a mug, Pel. The first time she wrote, it was a hard-luck story. I sent her a cheque. Not much, but—well, I sorta felt sorry for her. She'd seemed such a nice kid. I got a shock when she put in the hooks.

"Well, I'd just fixed up with Sue. You know how it is. I was scared. I sent her another cheque. Now this—" He tapped the pink paper. "It's got to stop, Pel."

"What about the police?"

"No, that might mean trouble for the girl—poor little devil!—and publicity. And I can't help feeling there's something behind it. P'raps someone's behind it. She didn't seem a wrong 'un. Tell you what, Pel. *You* see her. You know how to handle these things. Don't say you came from me. Find out what you can. Is she really broke, or plain bad? I want to give her a chance, but this has got to stop. It's not the money. I—"

"I know," Pel said. "I'll find out what I can. Jot the address down."

Rogers scribbled it on the back of the envelope, and Pel put it in his pocket. "Thanks, old man," he said. "Now, what's on your mind?"

They carried their glasses to the leather lounge against the wall, and Pel told him. When he finished Rogers was amused.

"You do get around," he said. "Finance a fellow to starve!" He added seriously, "He might die."

"He might die if he doesn't," Pel said. "He's been doing it so long he'd miss it."

"You don't mean it's on the level?"

"He says so. I believe him. If it isn't, what the heck?"

"As you say, what the heck?"

Rogers rose, and Pel followed him to the bar. Rogers took out his cheque book and fountain pen, and began to write.

"Wait a moment, Skin," Pel said. "What about your cut? We haven't fixed the percentage."

"Nix on that, Pel," Rogers exclaimed. "I'm no starving man's partner."

"But the show might flop."

Rogers looked up, pen suspended. "D'you think it's a good bet?" he asked.

"Yes," Pel said. "It's this good. If I had three hundred of my own, I'd risk two hundred with Sapolio."

Rogers regarded the other speculatively. "Fair enough," he said. "You and me could work together well, Pel," he added quietly.

"Oh, I like being on my own. I suppose I like being boss."

Rogers patted him on the shoulder. "Good man," he said, and finished writing the cheque. He handed it to Pel who said,

"Say, you've made it for two hundred."

"Fifty for working expenses," Skin explained. He grinned cheerfully. "Gives me a better chance of getting my money back."

A page boy called him to the phone, and he shook hands. "So long, Pel! You'll see the lady?" He hurried off leaving Pel holding the slip of paper, wondering at the ease with which he had got the money. Someone moving to the bar jostled him, and the cheque fell to the floor. Before he could retrieve it a man had stooped and picked it up.

"Well, well!" Rorke said, his eye coolly roving over the cheque. He handed it to the owner. "Two hundred pounds, eh? So little Pel's in the money."

Pel took a tram, and called on Mr and Mrs Sapolio again. As he walked up the two flights of stairs, a pleasant odour of cooking wafted downward. Marie met him at the door, a large wooden spoon in her hand.

"Ah-h!" she cried. "You fix, yes?"

Pel grinned. "Everything's okeydoke," he told her.

She threw her plump arms about him and kissed him roundly, knocking his hat off with the big spoon. She apologized profusely, and called her husband. "Henri, Henri, come quick! Pel fix 'im. Ev'ryt'ing's okeydoke."

Sapolio emerged from the inner room, rushed forward, and embraced Pel, kissing him on both cheeks. "You fix, eh? Your college tie 'e fix, yes?"

Pel showed them the cheque, and they gazed delightedly over his shoulder, Marie reading aloud every word on the slip of paper, beginning with the number on the left-hand side and finishing with the signature.

"Two hundred," Pel said. "One fifty for rent, the rest for exes."

Marie, suddenly wary, said pointedly. "Zis bank. She is good, eh?"

Sapolio cried, "Don' be nonsense, Marie. C'est bon. I 'ave cheque from zis bank before. Eight poun' nine an' four, an' what they do? I put zee cheque on zee counter and zee director 'e pay cash—on zee knocker." He touched the cheque

lightly with his finger. "She is good," he announced with finality.

Marie seized the precious piece of paper and kissed it repeatedly and rapturously, until there was a faint smudge of lipstick, and Sapolio exclaimed angrily. Suddenly she looked suspiciously at Pel. "What percentage?"

Pel grinned. "Nary a one per cent."

She looked inquiringly at her husband. "What is this nary one per cent?"

Henri said, "You mean, m'sieur, zis college chum 'e don' take a cut?"

"S'right," Pel confirmed. "He's lent us the money. We pay him back out of takings."

Henri gazed in astonishment, then he turned, took a bottle from a shelf and set out three glasses. "Mamma!" he said. "We mus' drink zee 'ealth of zis gentleman." Silently he poured. "What is 'is name, m'sieur?"

"Rogers."

"We drink to—what name? Roger?"

"Rogers."

"Roger? Roger? Where I 'ear that name?"

Marie nudged him. "Nevair mind," she cried. "Drink good 'ealth, 'appy life, nice marriage, plenty kids for M'sieur Roger."

"To Skin!" Pel said.

"To zee good college tie!" Sapolio cried.

They drank, and set their glasses carefully on the table.

"An' now, Marie," Sapolio said, suddenly business-like, rubbing his hands together. "I mus'

start zee training. No potage to-night for poppa."

"What!" Marie shouted. "No potage! You 'ear 'im, Pel? No potage! I cook, I cook, I cook. All day long I stay in zee maisonette and prepare zee potage. I slave in zee kitchen. I cut zee vegetable, I skin zee pomme de terre, and listen, m'sieur, now 'e don' eat. All 'e t'ink about all zee time now is 'is stomach. Not'ing but starving, starving, starving! M'sieur Pel, you smell, eh?"

She gave a mighty sniff. "I cook 'im now. My potage wiz garlick. 'E is good." She turned on her husband, persuasively. "You forget your work to-night. You forget ol' man Stomach to-night, eh? You start train 'im to-morrow."

Pel stayed a while discussing plans, then walked downstairs. On the steps of the ground floor he recollected his promise to Rogers, and pulled out the pink envelope on which Skin had scribbled the girl's address: Dora May, Pimlico Flats, First Floor.

He grinned to himself. He was *at* Pimlico Flats. In a trice he had returned to Sapolio's apartment on the second floor. Madame opened the door.

"Ah!" she welcomed. "You 'ave come back. I tell poppa where is 'is manners. Why 'e don' invite you to dejeuner? You stay for my potage, yes?"

"Yes, please, M'sieur Pel. You stay," Henri urged.

Pel shook his head. "Sorry," he said. "I just came back to ask you do you know a lady on the next floor—Miss Dora May?"

Marie looked down her nose. Henri shrugged his shoulders. At last Marie said, "I do not know such a one."

"Oh," Pel shuffled his feet, embarrassed.

"Now, I remember," Henri said. "It is where I 'ear zee name of your frien'. I am passing downstairs and I 'ear zee lady's voice. She say, very impatient, 'Oh, it is always Roger, Roger, Roger.' Then the door close, and I 'ear no more."

"I 'ope," Marie said, sedately, "zis person is not frien' wiz Mistaire Roger."

"Oh, no, no," Pel said hastily. "I had a little business with her, that's all."

"Oh." Marie looked down her nose again, a very model of propriety.

"Well," Pel said, anxious to remove himself from the atmosphere he had created, "I'll be seein' you."

Marie bade him good-bye a little frigidly, and returned to the kitchen.

Henri came to the door and stepped out into the passage. He spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders, and gestured at his apartment. "Such a one!" he said. "She is what you call zee straight lace, eh?" He winked at Pel. "But you and I we are not of the straight laces, no." He smacked Pel heavily on the shoulder, grinning broadly.

"You've got me all wrong, Henri," Pel said, quietly.

"I know, I know," Henri said. "You do not 'ave to be ashame wiz Poppa Sapolio. Oh, no. Boys will be boys."

"Henri!" The voice came commandingly from the apartment, and he stepped back hastily, bestowing on Pel a portentous wink as he closed the door.

Pelham shrugged his shoulders. He went down one flight, and found a door at the top end of the first landing and immediately under Sapolio's entrance. There was a card in a little slot:

MISS DORA MAY.

He stood at the door, listening. Inside he could hear a woman singing softly to herself. There was something vaguely familiar about the voice, that puzzled him. He knocked.

The singing stopped abruptly. After a moment footsteps crossed the room, and the door was opened a few inches. A young woman peered out and looked Pel up and down. Then she opened the door wider.

"Well," she said, "for crying out loud! Come inside."

Her face was pretty, but there was a suspicion of hardness about the mouth and a cold cynicism about the eyes.

"How'd you find me, Pel?" she asked.

He took out his case and selected a cigarette. He was thinking hard. "Luck," he said, without looking at her.

"That's the only luck stuck its head in here for a long time."

He lit his cigarette. "What you doing, Rena?" he asked quietly.

She crossed to the window, and gazed down into the narrow little street. "Nothing," she said after a while.

He went over and stood beside her. "Can't live on that," he said.

"Why'd you come, Pel?"

He touched her arm. "Let's sit down, Rena."

They sat on the settee. "You expecting anyone?" he asked.

She hesitated. "No—at least not yet."

"Look, Rena," he said, "you know me. I'm not a sticky beak."

She gestured assent and waited, and he went on, "I've done plenty, but I never seen the inside of a jail."

"You will," she promised.

"Oh, no I won't," he said. "'Cause why? 'Cause I'm careful. There ain't one thing I've ever done that ain't inside the law."

"Meaning what?" She looked at him a little scornfully.

He smoked silently for a little time, then dropped his cigarette and stubbed it with his toe.

"Don't mind the carpet," she said. "It ain't mine."

He ignored that. "Ever see the inside of a jail for women?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I've been around. I once went to a movie."

"Not nice, eh?" He glanced up at her well-tailored head. Nice, he thought. She was proud of that hair. Pretty. Softer than her face. But it hadn't always had that hard look. He went on: "I believe they cut your hair off. I don't know why. Seems silly to me. Robs a woman of her self-respect."

She burst out petulantly. "What are you talking about?"

He put his finger lightly on her knee. "Lay off Rogers, Rena," he said softly.

There was silence for a moment. She rose, picked a book from a table, and tossed it on one side.

"Roger who?" she parried. It was too obvious.

He said, "He's a good guy, Rena. We went to—school together."

"I didn't know that," she said quickly. "I was told—I thought he was just a mug. Buying things with his money."

Idly he picked up an envelope from a small table, and read the address. He took the pink envelope from his pocket. "Is this another of these?" he asked.

She gave a quick glance, and turned away again. "Only more so," she said.

Slowly he tore the two envelopes in pieces, and

threw them into the coal scuttle. "Did you think it up yourself?" he asked.

"That's my business."

"O.K. But it don't sound like the queen of the trapeze." He walked to the door.

"Don't forget I can write another."

He turned, his hand on the door. "You won't," he said. "I've never given you a wrong steer, Rena. Don't worry. I tell you this guy Rogers is a good guy. Things'll come right."

"Thanks—Father Christmas," she scoffed.

"You'll see." He smiled at her, then with studied casualness he asked, "Where's the show?"

"Up north." She tried to be indifferent.

"Business good?"

"Usually is up that way. I never hear."

His roving eye caught sight of a photograph on the mantelpiece, and he strolled back and picked it up. It showed a clean-shaved elderly man, with shrewd eyes under heavy black brows, but the hair was snow-white.

"How's the dad?" he asked.

"How should I know?"

"News travels. You ain't the only one in circus."

"I never see any of the old bunch."

"Why don't you go back, Rena?" he asked, without looking at her. "Do you good to get aloft again." He hummed a waltz air. "Remember? Gee, I liked being with that show. I think I watched your act every night. I'm city, but you belong there, under canvas. All this," he indicated

the room with a broad gesture, "is punk for you." He looked her over. "You could do with some fresh air." He hummed the waltz air again.

As he put the photograph back he noticed on the mantelpiece a latch-key strung with a tiny piece of red thread. "Don't say if you don't want," he said. "Anyone else got a key of the apartment?"

A flush spread slowly over her face. "If anyone else asked me that, I'd tell him to mind his own dam' business," she said angrily.

"Quite right, too," Pel agreed, equably. "I bet *this* is the only one, anyhow."

He hummed the waltz air again. "I can't get that trapeze music outa my mind," he said.

Suddenly she began to cry. "How can I, Pel?" she sobbed. "Go back, I mean."

"Maybe I can fix it," he said.

"Could you, Pel? The old man's tough."

"You're telling me," he said.

"I walked out on him."

"I could see him."

"When?" She was eager now.

"Soon, mebbe. I've got something to do here first—a new show. In a week or two I could slip up north. Find out the locations."

"I will, Pel, I will."

He smiled at her, patting her arm. "Atta girl."

She dried her eyes. "Oh, Pel, I've been all sorts of a fool. I thought it'd be easy, but it's been tough. Everywhere I went it was 'What have

you done? Where've you been?' What could I say—up on a trapeze?"

"You don't have to tell me," he said, but she went on,

"I had enough money for a bit. It soon went. I met a man. He was different. I guess I had a romantic hang-over. You've been away from the show. You wouldn't know."

"Don't worry," he said. "It's over, anyhow. You're going back."

"You bet your sweet life it's over," she said.

"Spoken like a Maroni," he said.

She glanced at the clock. "Better go," she said.

"I get you. Watch your step, kid."

He closed the door, and walked slowly downstairs. He could smell Ma Sapolio's soup. A man was entering the apartment house as he stepped out. As Pel moved aside, their eyes met. It was Rorke, and Pel got the fleeting impression that he was surprised to see him.

Rorke hesitated for the fraction of a second. "Well, if it isn't little Pel," he said. "The very man I'm looking for."

"How'd you know I was here?"

Rorke laughed. "We have our methods." He eyed Pelham shrewdly. "Anyway, what are you up to here? You don't live this way."

Pelham grinned. "It's awf'ly nice of you to inquire. As a matter of fact I've been invited to dinner with some old friends, but I can't stay. If you have the gift, you can smell it." He sniffed

elaborately. "The potage." He sniffed again. "The goulash—maybe."

"Whose dinner?" Rorke asked. His nose crinkled.

"Believe it or not," Pel said confidentially, "it's being prepared for none other than Henri Sapolio, the world's premier fasting man."

"Good Lord!" Rorke said. He tapped Pel on the shoulder. "Starving man or no starving man," he said. "I want a word with you—in my office to-morrow."

"I may be busy," Pel said.

"See you're not," Rorke warned him, and walked to the tram stop.

"You do look after one," Pel said. "It's nice of you."

Pel jumped on a tram. Once he glanced back, but the plain-clothes man was still at the car stop. Maybe, Pel thought, he'd go back and check up with Sapolio. Well, let him. It was all clean and above board, and he'd meet his match with Marie. All the same he felt faintly irritated.

He cast his mind back, checking up on his activities for the past few years—the auction mart, door-to-door peddling, selling razor paste on the street, a little house-to-house phrenology, a few months with the circus. He could see nothing wrong. Nothing for Rorke to make a fuss about.

Nice people, staid people with steady jobs and a regular pay, people who found their wages waiting for them every Friday, who didn't have

to worry where it was coming from or how on earth the boss was going to raise it—these people might have raised their eyebrows at some of the things he'd done, but only because he lived from day to day.

If his activities had brought him in a lot of money, enough money to run a car and live in a house too large for him in a nice suburb, the same people's eyebrows would have remained normal. Pel knew it, but it didn't make him bitter.

He was always careful to keep within the law. He might go close to the border, but he never stepped across. And he had his own code of morals. The morals of other people never worried him.

No, he thought, as his tram carried him homeward, there was nothing Rorke could pull him in for—nothing that anyone could pull him in for. Rorke, of course, had never forgiven him for that showground affair. He hadn't meant to make the plain-clothes man look a fool. It was self-protection. It just happened to be Rorke who hated to be ridiculed.

But why had Rorke tailed him up to Pimlico Flats? Perhaps he knew Sapolio was there. Or—Pel's heart gave a little jump—perhaps he was on to Rena Maroni. Whatever it was, it was strange that he should have been where he was.

With an impatient click of the tongue he dismissed Rorke from his mind. He left the tram,

and bought a bottle of lager at the hotel on the corner. Then he walked to the little furnished cottage he rented.

His wife was at the door, waiting. She looked absurdly young, Pel thought, and pretty; but, of course, he was prejudiced. Still—to be the mother of a boy of five! Every time he came home Pel felt a little catch in the throat. For it was home, even if it was and always had been a drab cottage with furniture other people had used and discarded. And Nell never complained.

Sometimes they'd talk ambitiously—of a home in the country, with a real garden and a cow and chickens, and together they'd get really enthusiastic. But Pel in secret wondered what he'd do in the country. He would look at his long, white fingers unspoiled by hard manual work, and try to picture himself digging, cleaning the fowl-house, milking the cow. Pretty hard. Nothing in focus.

No, he was city—a lurker, a fellow who lived on his wits, with no trade, no profession, relying on his imagination for his bread and butter.

Still, it would have been nice for Nell and the kid. Not much fun for her living in furnished cottages, or more often rooms, constantly changing addresses, with no time to take root and make friends. There was always the lottery. Someone had to win. Pel had long since made up his mind that if ever he had a few thousands, Nell should have her home in the country no matter what he did.

He kissed his wife and, arm in arm, they entered the house.

"How's the kid?"

"He's all right. Wants to go to school."

"Gee. We must be getting old. Do him good."

"But, Pel, he's only a baby."

"Teach him to mix. Brought you some beer."

He unwrapped the bottle.

"Is it an occasion?"

"I'll say. The Sapolio business has clicked."

"I'm so glad."

They sat down to dinner, the boy between them, and as they ate Pel told her about Rogers lending the money.

"He's a good scout. I hated asking him. He wouldn't take a share."

Nell was thoughtful for a moment, then she asked, "Pel, when this Mr Sapolio fasts, does he *really*? I mean—he really doesn't have any food?"

"I think it's on the level," Pel told her. "In fact I'm sure of it. They act dinkum." He told her about Henri and Marie.

"But," she persisted, "how does he live in that awful glass house? How can a man go without food for seventy days?"

The youngster pushed his spoon about his plate without interest. "I wish I was a starving man," he said suddenly.

"You eat your vegetables," Nell admonished, "or you'll never be a man at all."

Pel told her about Rorke, and she was perturbed. "There's nothing, is there?" she asked anxiously.

"One thing," he said. "He's found out I'm in love with my wife." He leaned over and kissed her.

"Pel," she said, blushing a little, "I wonder if the people you meet know what you're really like."

"I don't think they do," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

IN the morning he was tremendously busy. He cashed Skin Rogers's cheque, and surprised the agent for the shop he wished to rent by offering him ten weeks' money in advance. He spread the pound notes on the desk. The sight seemed to stagger the agent. It was some moments before he could pull himself together sufficiently to scout Pel's suggestion that the rent be reduced.

Pel began to gather up the notes and put them back in his wallet.

The agent said, hastily, "Just a minute, Mr. Pelham. To oblige you I'll ring the owner."

Pel watched his fingers dialling. He saw exactly what he did, and he knew there was no such index number. The man was talking into a dead phone. He said nothing, enjoying the comedy. The agent talked to an imaginary owner at the other end of the line.

"It's up to you, sir," he said, acting his head off. "Personally, I should advise acceptance. What's that? Just a minute, sir." He clapped his hand over the receiver and said in a loud whisper, "He says he'll take fourteen or nothing."

Pel leaned across the table and whispered equally loudly, "Tell him—*nothing*." He rose, but the agent stretched out a detaining hand and spoke into the phone again. "Sorry, sir, Mr. Pelham's limit is thirteen pounds ten—"

"Thirteen," Pel amended, turning to go.

"Thirteen pounds per week, with ten weeks in advance," the agent said promptly. "Yes, yes, cash in advance. You will? Oh, good, good! I don't think you'll be sorry, sir." He hung up, perspiring a little.

Pel came back and sat down opposite him, grinning. He waved to the telephone. "Nice feller."

"Oh, fine."

"Liked the way you beat him down. Nice work," Pel said, and counted out a hundred and thirty one-pound notes. He took his receipt, and the agent shook hands warmly and escorted him to the door. Funny, Pel thought. When he met him first the man had been barely civil. One hundred and thirty pounds in one-pound notes looks a powerful lot of money.

He smiled as he recollected the imaginary telephone talk. Now, if he'd pulled that one, people would have called it sharp practice. Perhaps the difference between legitimate and crooked business was a matter of location. Things done in a nice office with a bit of carpet were all right. The same things done in a circus tent, for instance, with a tan bark floor, were all wrong.

Pelham went to a timber firm. He handed his business card to an office boy. "Take that in to the manager, please."

The boy coolly read the card, and announced, "He won't see you."

"And why not?" Pel was slightly amused.

"He won't have no truck with sideshows," the boy said.

"No?" Pel inquired. "Why this extraordinary prejudice?"

"Once," the boy told him, "a feller didn't pay him."

"Indeed!" Pel said. "But, my dear sir, tell me. Other gentlemen with whom he has truck—do they always pay him cash on the nail?"

"No fear, they don't," the boy said. "We're always tailing 'em up."

"Then," said Pel calmly, "I think you may safely take my card in."

"It won't be any good," the boy said pessimistically, "but I'll give it a go."

"Thank you," Pel said warmly. "Thank you very much. Very much indeed."

The lad looked at him suspiciously, and moved into an inner office. He left the door ajar. Through the opening Pel watched him hand the card to a man seated at a desk. He looked like a man who had eaten something bad. He snatched the card, glanced at it, and tore it in two. Pel saw him drop the pieces into a wastepaper basket at his side.

The boy returned to the counter, shutting the door after him. He shook his head lugubriously. "I told you," he said. "If I was you, I'd go away and try again next year."

"Well," Pel said, "if he can't see me, I'll ask him to return my card."

The boy stared. "He tore it up," he said.

"Nevertheless," Pel persisted, "I want it. It cost me money. Go on. Tell him."

"He'll boot me out," the boy prophesied.

"I'll boot you in if you don't," Pel said, but he grinned when he said it, and the grin won.

"Gee!" the lad said. "This'll be fun."

Again he knocked on the manager's door and entered. Pel saw the man look up with an exasperated glare. It looked as if the bad things he had eaten had begun to get in their early punches. Pel heard muffled conversation, saw the man scowl, dive into his vest pocket, and hand something to the boy. The lad left the inner office, shut the door, and came back to the counter. He was grinning broadly.

"He says the card's tore up, but he told me to give you this penny to pay for it."

Very gravely Pelham took the coin and put it in his pocket. Then he drew out another card and handed it to the boy. "Will you please thank your boss for his courtesy," he said, "and tell him that the cards are two a penny, and that I am sending him this one which is, in every particular, identical with and the exact counterpart of the other?"

The lad grinned. He was beginning to enjoy himself. He disappeared, and Pel turned to go, but paused at the door to dust his shoes lightly with his handkerchief. In a moment a voice behind him said, "Excuse me, Mr ——"

Pel turned. "Pelham is the name," he said. "It's on the cards."

The manager was standing at his office door. He began to smile, and when he smiled you saw that he really was not such a terrible-looking

fellow. "You wished to see me, Mr Pelham. Will you please come in?"

"Thank you." Pel was very dignified. He removed his hat as he stepped into the inner office and accepted a chair.

The man turned the card over in his fingers and gave a little laugh. "I must apologize," he said, uneasily. "I'm afraid I was a little short."

"Don't mention it," Pel said. "Onions do it to me. In any case I find the present too exacting, and the future too hazardous to worry about the past."

The manager looked across the table and observed his visitor with shrewd eyes. "Now, sir, what can I do for you?"

Pelham told him. He wanted a room built within a room. It was to be twelve feet long by seven feet broad, and seven feet six high. The ceiling was to be wood, and big glass windows were to run completely around it.

"And do you mean that this man will live in this room for ten weeks?" the timber merchant asked.

"He hopes to."

"And what about openings? I suppose there's to be a trick door or something."

Pel shook his head. "Just a tiny slit big enough to pass letters through."

"No others?"

"No."

"How will you feed him?"

"We don't. He will live on soda water and cigarettes."

"Well, well! I thought all these shows were fakes."

Pel's eyes lifted. Then he reached out with his cane and tapped a highly veneered table. "I bet," he said, "underneath the polish, that's just plain deal. But nobody goes into a shop and looks at that sort of table and says, 'It's a fake.' They ask themselves, 'Do I like looking at it?' and 'Is it worth my money?'"

"And is Mr Sapolio worth the money?"

"Yes," Pel said. "People like to see something different—something that doesn't enter into their daily lives. A king, or a notorious criminal, a starving man—even a dead elephant."

"Dead elephant?"

Pel nodded. "Plenty have seen 'em alive. Very few have seen 'em dead."

"Well I'm dashed. I'd have written off a dead elephant as a dead loss. I'd have buried him, but you'd have exhibited him and made enough to pay his funeral expenses."

"Every man to his job," Pel said, smiling.

The other rubbed his chin, looking at the figures he'd jotted down. "This'll cost a bit."

"How much?"

"Roughly—" He named a sum.

"Fair enough," Pel agreed.

"You'll pay cash in advance?"

"No," Pel said, promptly.

"You won't, eh?"

"No," Pel said. "I'll pay a deposit. That's fair. You don't ask your other customers for cash." With his cane he flicked a pile of the firm's account forms stacked neatly in a container on the desk. His eyes had caught sight of the line *net cash in thirty days*. "I'll pay balance on completion of job," he said. "I don't want thirty days."

The other man rose abruptly. "I'll take a chance," he said.

"You're not taking any chance," Pel told him. "I take the chance."

"You?"

"Yes. I don't know wood and I don't know glass. I don't know a thing about carpentering. The job mightn't be any good."

"It will be." The timberman laughed. "Anyway, I bet you'd know."

Pelham paid the deposit, and carefully stowed the receipt in his pocket book.

"You carry a lot of notes," the timberman said, as Pel put a bundle back in his pocket.

"You'd have shied off a cheque."

The other laughed. "You bet."

Pelham pulled a bundle of notes from his pocket. It was not the same bundle as that from which he had paid the deposit. It was bound with elastic bands, and he threw it carelessly on the desk. "And yet," he said, "money in notes impresses you. How much d'you think's there?"

The timberman pursed his lips. He saw that the

outside note was a fiver. "A hundred," he hazarded.

Pel picked up the bundle, slipped off the elastics, and unrolled the bundle. He removed the outer five-pound note and let the rest run through his fingers. "Just a fiver," he said. "The rest are—just notepaper."

"Well, I'm hanged!"

"Show stuff," Pel said. "Like the big bottles of coloured water in the chemists' windows. Looks important, but means nothing if you really think."

The manager showed him to the door. "I'm glad I met you," he said. "I'm sorry about the card. You know we have to be careful. We were done in by a circus chap some months ago."

"Yes?" Pel said. "Mind saying who?"

"Not at all. Chap called Castelli—but he was Irish."

"That's right," Pel said. "Pat Castles."

"Know him?"

"I did. His tent show was blown away in a storm. Got pneumonia out in the wet, trying to save his animals."

"Is that so? Too bad. Still, he should have let me know."

"He couldn't," Pel said. "He died in three days."

The timberman went back to his office and brought his hat. "I'm going out to buy Mr Pelham a drink," he said.

"Yes, sir."

Pelham went nearer to the lad. He stretched out his hand suddenly and extracted a two-shilling piece from the air. "You should have seen that there," he said to the astonished youth. He put the coin into his hand. "It's yours, anyway," he said.

The timberman learned a lot more while he was having his drink. He had once seen Houdini.

"Ah, there was a man," Pel said. "He could pass a needle and thread clean through his cheek."

"How did he fake that?"

"He didn't," Pel said. "He really did it."

When he got back to his office the timberman went quickly and counted the one-pound notes Pelham had given him as deposit. They were all there.

"I hope you don't want 'em in a hurry," Speel, the printer, said when Pelham handed him the copy for the signs he needed.

"Always in a hurry, Mr. Speel?" Pel grinned.

"You're all the same, you fellows," Speel growled. "Sometimes I wish I'd never seen a showman."

A telegraph messenger entered.

"I bet this is more trouble," the old man said, opening the envelope. "There y'are. What did I tell you?" He read the message. "'Send five hundred daybills to-night's train Dubbo, five hundred Wellington, five hundred ——' That's Maroni for you. Who does he think he is? King Muck? Owes me five hundred quid, too."

"But he'll pay," Pel smiled.

"Of course he'll pay," the old man snorted. "That's the trouble with him. Just when you think you've got a good excuse for telling him to go to hell, in he pops with his money." He peered over his spectacles at Pel. "Once he owed me fifteen hundred pounds. Folk told me I was a mug to let him get into me like that. They gets me all het up. So I sends him a wire, 'What about my fifteen hundred pounds?' And what d'you think he wires back? 'What about my thousand daybills? Quit worryin' and you'll do better printing'."

"He's a good scout," Pel said.

"You don't have to tell me," Speel said and, leaning towards Pel, added in a lower tone, "Say, Pel, what became of that girl of his?"

"Rena?"

"The one on the flying trapeze. We had her on a daybill in tights. Three-colour job. All the lads pinched one."

"She's here. I saw her last night. She's going back to the show."

"No! Well, I'm glad to hear that. Thought old dad looked kinda peeked last time I saw him. Didn't like to ask." He looked at the copy Pel had given him. "What you got this time?" He read out:

VISITORS ARE REQUESTED TO PASS
SILENTLY ROUND THE GLASS TOMB.

He looked up. "What is it?" he asked. "A mummy?"

"Starving man."

The old man raised his eyebrows. "Oughta be good," he said. "Funny, ain't it, how folk'll pay to see a man starving in a shop and won't give him a nickel if he's starving in the gutter." He surveyed the paper again. "I'll put a black border round this," he said. "Give it dignity. Sort of mourning-card effect."

"Fine," Pel agreed.

Speel picked up another piece of copy and read:

OWING TO INDISPOSITION SAPOLIO
WILL REMAIN IN BED TO-DAY.
QUIET PLEASE.

"Good stuff," he commented. "That better be in strong black too. How long's he starving?"

"Seventy days."

Speel chuckled. "No good to gundy. Bet he eats his head off when he comes out. Want some postcards, I s'pose?"

"Stocked up for the moment, but we'll want some later. Need some of these, though." He tossed over a worn pamphlet entitled *Starving for a Living—By Henri Sapolio, the World's Champion Faster. Price Sixpence.*

"Come up and see the show some time, Mr Speel."

"You bet."

"Want a deposit?"

"I got no time makin' out receipts. I'll give you the bill when you collect the stuff."

"Thanks, Mr Speel. So long!"

The old printer stood, papers in hand, and called as he was leaving, "Let's know about Dad Maroni's girl. I bet the old man'll be tickled pink." He looked down at the telegram. "Five hundred Dubbo, five hundred ——— To-night's train!" He looked at his watch. "Who does he think he is?" He bawled loudly to someone inside, "Hey, Bill! You got to get two thousand daybills away to Dad Maroni . . . What? No, not next week. *To-night!*"

As Pel stepped into the street he was hailed from a taxi. Dan Carey, a carnival man, beckoned him. "Going up town, Pel?"

Pel stepped into the car.

"Meet Mr Micklewitz."

A midget man sat in the corner of the cab, and gravely held out his hand, which Pel as gravely accepted.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr Milke—"

"Call me Mick."

"That's the stuff," Carey cried. "Mick's from Vienna. I brought him out. Paid those steamship robbers full fare, too."

The midget could not have been more than thirty inches high, but he was in perfect proportion. His eyes were intelligent, his head was well shaped, his figure dapper. He was neatly dressed, and you noticed at once the shiny, well-made shoes.

They were a perfect fit, and were made for him—twelve pairs at a time—by a Paris expert.

As a showman Pel regarded him with approbation, and his approval grew when he heard the little fellow talk. "I hope you'll be a big success here, Mick."

"Thank you. You are in the show business?"

"Pel's one of the best spruikers in the country," Carey said. "What you working on, Pel?"

Pelham told him.

"That ought to hold 'em," Carey said. "Pity you couldn't start him in the city, work up the excitement, and finish the last ten days on the showgrounds where the mob is. Oh, boy!"

"It's an idea," Pel said, but he didn't think it was.

"I work with Sapolio one, two, three times," the midget said, in his childish voice. "In Paree, in Lisbon, and in Buenos Aires. He is a good man."

"I think so," Pel said.

"Where can we drop you?" Carey asked.

Pel grinned. "At the police office, if you don't mind," he said.

"Wow!" Carey said. "Don't tell me. I can guess. You've murdered someone."

"You're a mind-reader, Dan. Good-bye, Mick. Like to see you and your manager some time."

Carey cackled. "Him?" He jerked his thumb at the midget. "He's his own manager. And can he manage! Boy, after I've paid him his cut I'll be opposition to your starving man—only mugs

won't be paying to see me. So long, Pel! See you keep your pick and shovel tidy." He turned to the taximan. "Gee up, there!"

Rorke was not at his office. Pel left his name, and was leaving when he ran into a tall, fair man who grabbed his arm.

"Why, hello, Pelham!" he called genially.

Pel shook the hand he extended. "I was looking for Rorke, Mr Linley," he said. "He wants to see me."

"The chief's put him on to something," the detective said. "He won't be back to-day. What does he want with you?"

"I don't know."

"Been up to anything?"

Pelham laughed. "Not so's you'd notice."

Linley took him by the arm. "Not in a hurry, are you? Rather wanted to have you meet someone." He steered Pel into his office, and spoke on the phone for a while; then he got up. "Come on."

They walked down a passage, and a policeman opened the door of another room. A heavy, round-faced man rose from his seat at a desk.

"This is Pel Pelham, chief," Linley said. "Pelham, meet Superintendent Graham."

The two shook hands. "Sit down, Mr Pelham," Graham said. "Don't go, Linley. Linley and I were speaking of you, Mr Pelham, and I thought I'd like to meet you. From what Linley says,

you're the sort of man that might be very useful to us here."

Pel was frankly puzzled. "I really called because Rorke asked me," he said.

Superintendent Graham raised his eyebrows.

"They don't hit it," Linley explained. "Incom-patability of temper."

Graham smiled. "I think I remember something about an incident on the showground. What was it?"

"I had been selling my prize writing paper—" Pel began.

"Explain the racket to the chief," Linley said.

Pel hesitated, and Graham said with a laugh, "Without prejudice, of course."

"It's a door-to-door stunt," Pel explained. "When the lady opens, I've got several boxes of notepaper spread out on the veranda. I tell her I'm advertising the Golden Laurel Writing Tablets—a full box with thirty-six envelopes—and, to publicize the same, the Golden Laurel people have included a prize in every packet. It may be only a little prize—a packet of hairpins or chewing gum, a little brooch or pin—but, in every twelfth packet there is a watch.

"I am stooping, and move the packets round with my left hand as I talk."

"And can he talk!" Linley interposed.

"'In this one,' I say," Pel went on, "'there may be some little trinket, in this a packet of pins, in this the watch itself.' I indicate three packets on the ground, and pick up another packet with my

right hand and, still talking, hold it up high in the air, saying, 'In this one perhaps a bit of chewing gum.' Still holding the packet with my right hand extended, with my left hand I go on moving other packets around, saying what I think might be in them.

"Then I casually put down the box I have been holding in my right hand, and say, 'So, there you are, lady. Try your luck'."

"And then?" The superintendent was interested.

"And then," Pel said, "she buys the packet I had held up in my right hand."

"Why?"

"Because," Pel explained, "she heard the watch ticking."

"But when later on she opens the packet, there is no watch inside."

"There is no watch."

"Then how did she hear the ticking?"

Pel extended his right arm and pulled back his cuff. "Because," he explained gravely, "I had a loud-ticking watch sewn inside my cuff. When I held up the box of notepaper, it was that watch she heard ticking."

The chief thought for a moment. "Wasn't that cheating?"

Pel nodded. "Yes, sir," he said. "She was cheating. She thought she was on a sure thing. She was buying notepaper, not a watch. I asked her to take a chance."

"After all, sir," Linley put in, "for the sake of argument, if by some chance a man knew for

certain which marble was to be drawn from the lottery barrel, and then asked for and received a ticket with the corresponding number, it wouldn't be fair to the other investors."

"That's right, sir," Pel said. "When these women buy the box they are quite certain the watch is inside. They are spoiling the chances of other buyers."

The superintendent looked a little bewildered. "Good Lord!" he said at length. "Between you, you'll talk me into believing anything. But how does Rorke come into this?"

Linley told him, "Pelham was on the show-ground with a group around him. He had spread out his boxes. Rorke was watching, but Pelham didn't see him. Suddenly Rorke noticed that Pelham had twelve boxes on the ground. Mind you," he smiled at Pel, "he's careful to say, 'There's one in every twelve'—not, 'There's one in every twelve I put out.' But Rorke took it to mean the latter."

"I think I would, too," Graham said.

Linley continued, "Rorke yelled, 'I'll take the twelve!' Pel recognized him and knew he was in for trouble, or at least legal argument he couldn't afford. Quick as a flash he empties another dozen or so boxes on to the ground, mixing them with the ones already there, and, with a really charming smile, I'm sure, he says, 'I'm sorry, sir. I couldn't do that. If I sold you the whole dozen I'd be contravening the lottery act'."

The superintendent stared. "But that's nonsense," he said.

"Of course it is, sir," Linley said, "but Rorke didn't see that as quickly as you might have. And the crowd was taken in. It sounded good logic."

"I'd like you to know, sir," Pel said, "that the watches are really in the packets."

"One in every twelve?"

Pel hesitated. "Well, sir," he said at last, "our arithmetic isn't always so good."

The superintendent grunted. "Anyway," he said, "the watches can't be much good."

"They're not," Pel agreed blandly, "but the writing paper's fine."

Superintendent Graham began drawing faces on his blotting pad. Without looking up he said, "You know, Pelham, we often get in a jam here. There's things we want to know—things that it's difficult for Linley and his boys to discover. Now, you move about. I don't mean you mix with criminals, but you live in a different world. You hear things that we don't. You should be able to help us." He looked up across the desk. "You could help us, Pelham, and do us a great service."

He paused, as Pel did not speak. "We could put you on to a job right now." He glanced at Linley. "And we would not be ungrateful."

Pel looked down at his fingernails. They were well kept, highly polished. "I think I get you, sir," he said. "But I wouldn't be any good."

"Why?"

"Well, sir, I'd be prejudiced. I'd be for the underdog all the time. Please don't get me wrong," he went on as Linley was about to interrupt. "I know there are plenty of bad crooks and good policemen, but I've sort of been through the mill, and I wonder what made the crooks crooked. When you've got that bee in your bonnet you can't see straight—from your angle, I mean." He finished a little lamely, a bit uncertain of himself.

"I see." The superintendent rose. "Well, perhaps you'll change your mind. We'll have a yarn later. Good-bye, Pelham."

Linley escorted him to the front entrance. "Sorry, Pel," he said, "but you don't know the half of it. Don't get the idea he was asking you to become a police pimp. And keep it under your hat."

The detective returned to Graham's office. The superintendent was gazing at his cigarette smoke. "You know, Linley," he said, musingly, "I'm rather glad he didn't come at it all at once. And yet—I watched him when you were talking about Rorke, and I'm sure he'd be just the man for the job."

CHAPTER FOUR

TWENTY-FOUR hours later, while the carpenters were hammering inside the shop, Pel had the windows plastered with signs surrounding huge photos of Sapolio.

Sapolio starving in Paris. Sapolio starving in Berlin. Police controlling the crowds struggling to get a glimpse of Sapolio starving in Madrid. A big sign announced that the Fasting Man would begin on an attempt to break his own mighty record of sixty-five foodless days.

Will he do it? Can he do it? Can human endurance stand the mighty strain? Enclosed in a glass house, watched day and night, Sapolio will be visible in his living tomb subsisting only (in smaller type) on Park Avenue, his favourite cigarettes, resting on a mattress kindly supplied by Messrs Beankins and Co., Pty Ltd, and drinking nothing but Swish soda water, using Bolger's Indomitable Shaving Soap.

Come and see Sapolio enter the glass tomb. Admission Sixpence. Open twenty-four hours a day.

Sapolio and Marie came down to admire the set-up and, by and by, Dan Carey drove up in a taxi with his midget, Micklewitz. While Dan talked with Pel, Sapolio, Marie and the midget sat on boxes and conversed excitedly in French.

A carpenter, hammering nails, said to his mate, "Funny way to earn a living."

"You've said it."

The carpenter grinned down at the midget, and, winking broadly at his mate, said in atrocious French, "Parlez-vous Anglais?"

The midget looked up. "Oui, m'sieur," he replied, gravely. "I speak English."

The carpenter appeared a little nonplussed. The little man's eyes were so serious, his manner so direct. As the carpenter explained later to his wife, "'E looked almost bloody well human."

Marie exploded. "You betcha," she cried. "'E speak English. 'E speak French. 'E speak Italian. An' Spanish an' German. An' I nearly forget, 'e speak Russian, too. 'Ow many language you speak, big boy?"

The carpenter did not reply. He hammered hard. After a moment, when they had forgotten him, he said to his mate out of the corner of his mouth, "Comes easy to these foreigners. Anyway, the little blighter's got nothin' to do but sit and listen."

Marie said to Micklewitz, "'Ow your sister?"

"Married," the midget replied. "I had a cable yesterday. Married an army captain."

The carpenter dropped his hammer. The midget stooped down and retrieved it for him. "Permettez-moi, m'sieur," he said, and recollecting, translated, "Allow me, sir."

Carey came across, and Micklewitz rose to go. He shook hands with Sapolio, and bowed from the waist to Marie, kissing her hand.

The carpenter and his mate gaped. When the little man had gone, the carpenter said to Marie, "Say, missus, is 'is sister a snippet like 'im?"

Marie was a little annoyed. She didn't like "missus" and she resented "snippet," though she only vaguely knew what it meant.

"No," she said, "she is not snippet. She a big, fine woman like me—but," she added, anxious to be fair, "not so fat. And Micklewitz he ain't snippet either. 'E could put your brains in 'is little shoe."

Pel accompanied Marie and Sapolio to their apartment. As they entered the building Marie sniffed loudly and, uttering a wild cry, raced ahead of them up the stairs.

Sapolio looked at Pel significantly. "It is 'er goulash," he explained.

Pel left him at the first floor. "I want to call on my friend," he said.

Henri dug him in the ribs. "It is all right by me, mon ami," he said. "But Marie, she is so propaire." He lifted his eyes to heaven. "Nevaire mind," he added. "I will tell 'er you 'ave gone to zee lavabo." He pointed to the end of the passage.

Pel tattooed on the door. It opened at once, and Rena Maroni beckoned him inside. "Fancy you remembering that old knock," she said.

He sniffed. "You taken to smoking cigars?" he asked.

She flushed. "It was—a friend," she said. "A chap I know. He'll take some getting rid of."

"Good girl."

She wiped the corner of her eye with a tiny handkerchief. "Oh, Pel," she said, "what a fool I've been!"

"Ain't we all?" He flicked a thread from his coat. "If you don't like your first oyster, you don't have to eat a second."

"I'm afraid it's not going to be so easy as I thought," she said. "Getting away from things, I mean."

"Oh, yes it is," he comforted. "We'll be nailing Sapolio into his little box soon. Things'll be slow after the first few days—before we begin stunting, I mean. Then I'll run up and see the old man."

"It's awfully good of you, Pel. He thought a lot of you."

"He's not so bad himself, the old devil." Pel grinned. He looked at her appreciatively. "Gee, Rena," he said, "it'll be great to see you up on the old swing again."

She stretched her arms above her head, clutching the bar of an imaginary trapeze, humming a slow waltz air.

"How's the hands?" he asked.

She extended her arms towards him, palms up.

"I'm getting 'em fit," she said. "Rubbing 'em with you know what."

He grinned. It was an old circus custom, a little vulgar, but said to be efficient.

"Started the night you blew in."

"That's the stuff." He walked to the door. "I'll be seeing you," he said, and added casually, "Good sorts, old Pa Sapolio and Marie up on the

next floor. Marie'll be a bit lonesome when Sap goes into the tomb. How about you dossing up there with her?"

She touched him lightly on the cheek with her fingertip. "What a little fixer it is," she said. "No, Pel, not just for a day or two. You see—there's bits and pieces." Her eyes had hardened a little.

"Such as?" Pel asked softly.

"Oh, cigars and things."

He nodded understandingly. "Do it your own way, kid. But make it a clean break."

Her smile was a little grim. "I mean to," she said.

On the eve of the commencement of Sapolio's great fast Marie gave a party. It was to be an occasion, although Sapolio would eat very little, being in strict training. The big show carnival was imminent, and most sideshow managers and performers were in the metropolis.

All day long Marie cooked, referring occasionally to the big book of recipes, the very counterpart of that resting in the famous Cafe Bul Bul in the far-away Rue de la Soiree, with many a sigh as she realized her inability to procure ingredients commonplace in her native Paris. Before the guests arrived, the gateaux, the bisquit, the meringues, the savouries piled high, and Henri counted innumerable bottles and, mentally estimating the capacity of the expected guests, nodded

his head in satisfaction and polished the glasses on the sideboard.

To-day the Sapolios spent freely. They were the perfect host. To-morrow their bank account would be sadly depleted, but what of it? Poppa's great starve would be on its way. The money would roll in.

Everything in the larder would be lovely, for, left alone in her apartment, Marie would begin at once stocking up for the great day of his return when, emaciated, his clothes hanging loosely on a skeleton frame, his big brown eyes like two coals sunk in sockets in his white face, Sapolio would emerge from his glass tomb, once more a conqueror, the hero of seventy foodless days, vanquisher of his own redoubtable record.

Sapolio said suddenly, "Ah! No olive."

Marie rushed to his side, and made frantic search. There were no olives. "You mus' 'urry to zee corner shop, poppa," she cried.

Sapolio hurried off.

Dan Carey came early, bluff and boisterous, with Micklewitz the midget immaculate in evening dress, and, on their heels a lean-faced, curly-headed man with bright eyes. He wore thin patent-leather shoes and, as he walked, gave the impression that he was tiptoeing on springy rubber. He was Salvi, whose specialty was walking up ladders of sharp swords in his bare feet.

A slim, pretty girl with a gentle manner came in, her useless sleeves hanging limply at her sides. Marie enfolded her in a mighty embrace, led her

to a special seat, and brought Micklewitz over to talk with her.

"This is Estelle," she said. "Poppa's sweetheart."

"Everyone's sweetheart," Dan Carey amended, calling from across the room. "Hi ya, darling?"

The girl coloured a little, but smiled back.

The man in the shiny shoes said quietly, "'Lo, Estelle."

She looked up, and replied off-handedly, "Oh, 'lo, Salvi."

The midget took a gold case from his pocket and offered cigarettes. Estelle gently kicked one shoe from her right foot and lifted her leg. The extremity of her stocking had been cut away, and the bare toes, moving like fingers, took a cigarette. She bent her head slightly and the cigarette was between her lips. The midget struck a match and lit it for her, and stood talking in his grave way in a clear, childish treble oddly at variance with the words he used.

Sapolio returned, carrying a bottle of olives, waving to everyone. The room rapidly filled. Most present were talking; few seemed to be listening, but Marie could be heard above them all.

Someone rapped heavily on the door, and at Marie's "Entrez!" a taximan stuck his head in. "Hey!" he called. "Does this belong 'ere?" He gestured behind him, and stepped aside to admit a new guest.

He was a Chinaman, so big that he filled the whole doorway as he bent his head to enter. He

wore a mandarin's cap, and the thick soles of his boots enhanced his height. But what impressed most was not his abnormal height but the tremendous head and the great expanse of palm as he lifted his hand in formal salutation.

Carey jumped up. "I hope you don't mind, Marie," he said. "I told him where I was going—left the address with him, rather; but I didn't think he was coming. You never know what he's going to do." He led her to the giant. "This is Wang, Marie. Wang—this," he indicated Marie, speaking slowly, "this Ma-rie."

"Mah-ee." It was a singularly gentle voice that issued from between the thick lips. A great hand engulfed Marie's plump fingers, and a flicker of interest came into the melancholy eyes.

"Hoi." It was the forgotten taximan. "Who pays for this little lot?"

Carey hastened to satisfy him.

"He ought to be double rates," the man said. "Lord knows what he's done to my springs." Sapolio, perfect host, gave him a drink, and Carey showed him out.

"And don't forget," he said, "you've had the privilege of driving the mighty Wang, son of a king."

They found the Chinaman the biggest chair, and Salvi gave him a cigarette.

"He's a moody cus," Carey told Sapolio in an undertone. "I never know what he wants."

"All giants is the same," the starving man nodded understandingly.

"I gets him a Chinaman to look after him," Carey explained, "but, what happens? He can speak the lingo, but he's the wrong Tong. Can you beat it?"

"He is lonely, poor little giant," Marie said, and carried a foaming glass to her largest guest.

Pelham arrived alone. He liked these people. He understood them. They were his friends. He had associated with them and their sort all his life, but he never brought his wife among them. His family was a thing apart. Deep down in his heart he knew that there were better things to be done than those he was doing, a better world than the one he lived in. He'd often wondered about it. It wasn't that he was ashamed of his friends or his profession, such as it was, but his family was his shrine—something for private worship.

He waved to everybody, crossed and spoke to Estelle, and at length settled down by the Chinaman.

"Meet the Terror of Pekin," Carey said. "It's all right, he can't talk English. Isn't he a beauty? When I get him in his high boots and his tea-cosy hat, I'm frightened of him myself."

"He looks gentle enough."

"He is. The only trouble is I can't get him to keep to himself. Look at the way he breezed in here. All the people that saw him for nothing! Of course it don't mean a thing in a city this size, but if he gets to wandering in the smalls he'll be Dan Carey's own problem child." He left him to Pel.

Estelle smiled across the room at him, and he went and sat with her. "Can I help you with your outfit, Stella?" he asked.

"I'm all set, Dan. Thanks just the same."

"Why don't you link up with me? You know you can—any time." There was a hint of earnestness in his tone.

She looked down at her toes, curling and supple as any fingers. "I might yet, Dan," she said, softly.

"In your own good time," he said, as Marie joined them.

Pel had taken a pack of cards from his pocket, and was showing Wang some tricks. The Chinaman chuckled, and, extending his tremendous palm, patted Pel's shoulder. It was a gesture of gratification. Pel shuffled the cards. Then he sprang them from one hand to the other, the cards cascading prettily. His hands were not more than ten inches apart, but he swayed his arms with a semi-circular sweep, something in the fashion of a man playing a concertina, and one had the impression that the cards were falling much greater distances. The sleight of hand delighted Wang, bringing forth a series of delighted grunts and occasional unintelligible monosyllables. His soft almond eyes dwelt on Pel's face with the happy gleam of an infant's watching the amusing antics of a friendly adult.

Others came in. Some circus people, and a dapper, middle-aged man in an old-fashioned frockcoat. His name was Smith, but everyone

called him "professor." He brought with him a pretty, vivacious girl. She had natural platinum blonde hair, and, out of a pale face, vivid black eyes shone boldly. Dimpled cheeks added an impishness to her expression.

She kissed Marie. "I oughtn't to be here, lovey," she said, "but I couldn't resist. I just couldn't." She selected an elaborate piece of pastry and bit into it, talking with her mouth full. "M-m. I bet you made this. I ought to be home getting stencilled up. Bertie's got a new one all carved out for me."

The man in the frockcoat explained. "It's a beaut, Marie—a great big butterfly." He took the blonde by the arm and turned her around, demonstrating, while the girl continued to munch her pastry. "The wings are here, see?" He touched the blonde's shoulder blades. "Blues and greens and golds, and the head—here." He poked the girl in the back, and she spluttered a little. "With two big, red eyes; and the body curls down the spine—so. The wings finish on both sides of the 'ips—so."

"Listen, professor," the girl said. "If you've quite done with the still-life I'd like to begin looking the giant over."

Carey came up. "It'll be interesting, all right, professor," he said, with an appreciative glance at the blonde. "But what I don't understand is why you don't tattoo Bella all over and stop mucking about with stencils. You can do it."

"No, no!" The professor was unnecessarily vehement. "Never. I will not tattoo Bella. No!"

"And don't go putting ideas into his head, anyway," Bella said. "No tattooing for me, thank you. I'd get sick of looking at myself. Fancy going to bed with King Solomon and his court on your chest every night. And no one knows the difference, anyway. Look at this for tattooing." With a rapid movement she stooped and, manipulating mysteriously, pulled down her black silk stocking as far as her ankle.

Marie gave a little shriek. "Ugh!" she cried. "It frightens me."

The professor smirked. "I finished that off to-day," he said. "Fine, eh?"

Around the shapely leg a stencilled snake twisted from instep to knee, its glistening green and red scales winding about the calf, its head with wicked yellow eyes resting on the cap of the knee.

Bella stretched her leg, moving it from side to side, cleverly flexing the muscles so that the stencilled snake appeared to come to life and became a resplendent writhing serpent, whose eyes darted fire with every movement of the girl's knee.

"It's the same on the other leg," Bella said and, looking up, saw Salvi's parted lips and interested eyes. Suddenly turning away from him, she replaced her stocking.

Carey was congratulating the beaming Smith. "Good work, professor."

The professor clapped his hands lightly in an

almost feminine gesture. "But I am worried," he said. "I am upset. It will not come."

"What won't come?"

"The idea. The idea for the back of the knee. It eludes me."

"Well," Carey said, "you certainly do go places."

Bella flopped on her knees besides Estelle. "How are you, lovey?" She looked the other over carefully. "I like your hair. Do it yourself?"

The armless girl nodded.

"Gee!" Bella said. "It beats me. I hate doing my own. The professor fixes it up. Say, that guy ought to be a lady's maid. Tell me, who's the good-looking gink with the cheeky eyes—the curly-headed one."

Estelle's lip curled ever so little. "You mean Salvi?" she said.

"Is *he* the sword-walker?"

Estelle nodded. "That's him."

Bella looked across the room. Salvi was watching Pel's card tricks.

The blonde put her hand on Estelle's knee. "Don't broadcast it," she said, "but if that guy started anything, I believe he could walk all over me."

She did not see the expression on the armless girl's face, because Marie came hurrying across with a drink for Estelle. Thoughtfully she had provided a glass with a stem. Estelle stretched her leg effortlessly, and the toes took the glass

easily and naturally. "Thank you, Marie," she said.

"Everybody got some?" Marie inquired. Everybody had. Pel picked up the giant's glass and put it into his hand. "Go on, Dan," Marie said.

Dan Carey poised his glass. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, taking Sapolio by the arm. "I want you to drink the health of our good friend and host, Henri Sapolio, and wish him good luck! To-morrow he enters the tomb to make new history. I ask you to drink good health, long life, and many starves to the world's greatest fasting man, Henri Sapolio."

"Sapolio, the world's greatest starving man," they repeated, and drank. Pel looked across at Estelle and saw her slim leg lift and bend, the stem of the glass between her toes, the glass coming to her lips in a movement that was almost graceful. Then she was again sitting cross-legged, and the midget Micklewitz was taking the empty glass from her toes.

Pel thought, "What a woman!" He thought of the courage behind what so many regarded as show tricks, the years of patient practice following the accident that had robbed her of her arms.

The giant's huge paw fell with soft insistency on his arm, indicating the cards, and Pel dealt them again. The noise in the room was growing in volume. With the exception of Pelham and the giant, everyone seemed to be talking.

Marie called gaily, "The lavabo she is outside

on the end of zee passage when you want to powder zee nose."

They all laughed, and Carey asked her what she wanted for the rights. Excepting Wang and Pel, all began to move about, forming little groups, eating, drinking, talking, swopping yarns and recollections. Every now and then one or other would leave the room, and be boisterously greeted on returning.

Pel's game with Wang ended. The giant rose and stretched his arms. He grinned amiably, and pushed the ceiling with his fingers. "Stop him, Danny," Marie screamed. "'E'll bust zee 'ouse." The giant smiled at her, walked to the door and out. Carey said "Double rates!" and everyone laughed again.

Pel stood alongside Salvi. "How's tricks?" he asked, and they talked about show business until Bella came over and said, "Go away, Pel. I want to talk to Salvi."

"You'll be sorry," he said, laughing and walking away.

A little later the giant came back, and sat in his chair and closed his eyes.

The telephone rang sharply, adding to the din, and Marie answered it. "'Allo," she called. "'Allo. Who you want? Who? Un moment, sil vous plait." She turned to where Salvi was standing with Bella, and waved the receiver and pointed to the transmitter.

They were all so busy talking, and listening to Carey who was in the middle of a story, that most

did not notice him step quickly to the phone. He pressed the receiver to his ear and said, "Speak up." His eyes widened a little, and he quickly put the instrument down and left the room. Only Bella and the giant noticed him go. Wang opened big, somnolent eyes and followed his movements. Bella shrugged her shoulders.

With quick, silent steps Salvi ran down the stairs. He paused at Rena Maroni's door, but he did not knock. There was a key in the lock. He turned it and pushed the door. The room was dark.

Pel saw the giant's eyes on him, and he went to the professor and said, "Mind having a game with Wang? Poor devil feels out of it."

They crossed to Wang, and Pel handed the professor the cards, and he dealt them to the giant. Pel went over to Marie, Wang's mournful eyes following him.

"Could I have a word, Marie, in private?"

She looked surprised. "But, certainment," she said. She looked at the others and giggled. "M'sieur Pel 'e wish me to go wiz 'im to zee cabinet particulier," she said, as she led him to the kitchen amid good-natured banter.

"Look what's happening, Henri," Carey cried. The professor looked up from his cards, grinning, and Bella wiggled two long fingers on either side of her forehead. Then she went to Sapolio and said, "Never mind, pop. You can make love to me."

Marie shook her finger at them. "Now, you be'ave or I send you 'ome," she called.

As they left the room Salvi returned. He spoke to no one, but went straight to the sideboard and poured himself a drink. It was whisky, and he drank it neat and filled his glass again.

In the kitchen Marie turned to Pel. "What is it, mon ami?"

"Look, Marie," Pel said. "It's about that girl on the next floor."

He saw her stiffen, and her eyes hardened.

"Her professional name's not Dora May," he said.

"No?" Marie's tone was contemptuous. "Then why she use it?"

"Now, Marie, that's not fair," Pel said. "She needs help. I want you to help her. I haven't told anyone else. She wouldn't let me. You've heard of Maroni's?"

"The circus?"

"Yes."

"I meet the director, Papa Maroni."

"This girl's his daughter."

Marie did not answer all at once. Then she said quietly, "Mon Dieu."

"She's in some sort of a jam. She walked out on the old man, and he's mad. But she's going back if the old man will let her. She has promised."

"She is artiste?"

"One of the best. Trapeze, acrobat, wire-walker, rider—you know circus."

"What you want me to do Pel?"

"Go and see her—now. It will break the ice. Ask her up."

"Why, of course. Will she come?"

"We can try. We'll go down together."

They rejoined the others.

"Just as well," Carey said, dryly. "Pop was just asking me for a loan of my gun." From his pocket he produced a small revolver.

"Ugh!" Estelle cried. "Put it away, Mr Carey."

He grinned at her cheerfully. "I'll shoot you, my girl," he said, "if I get any more of that mister stuff." He dropped the gun carelessly into his pocket, staring at her. When he saw her eyes drop and the colour mount to her cheek, he shut his eyes and said under his breath, "Daniel Mulcahy Carey, it's your step you should be watching this night."

Marie went up to Sapolio and kissed him roundly. "Oo, my little cabbage," she purred, "were you very jealous?"

Sapolio grinned happily.

Bella said, "So it's all over between us? Anybody want a discarded mistress?" She looked pointedly at Salvi, who was still at the sideboard.

He did not seem to hear her. He filled his glass again.

Marie whispered into her husband's ear. He raised his eyebrows, but said nothing. With Pel she crossed to the door of the passage. "When we come back we 'ope to 'ave surprise," she said to the company.

She opened the door and, as she did so, from somewhere below there came a piercing scream.

Marie cried, "Mon Dieu, what was that?"

They all crowded to the door and through it, and stood at the top of the steps, Wang and Salvi in the rear, the Chinaman towering above them, peering down. Pelham began to run downstairs. Carey followed him while the others stood, holding the stair railing, gazing, wondering.

Pelham knocked on Rena Maroni's door, insistently, but there was no reply. He called "Rena!" and stood listening, his ear to the panel. He tried the door, but it did not give.

"It came from here, all right," Carey said. "There's a light in the room. It's funny. You know her, Pel?" He indicated the card on the door.

Pel nodded. "Rena Maroni," he said, and Carey said, "Good God!"

Pel tattooed on the door while Carey waited, curious but silent. The others began to come slowly down the stairs, a step or so at a time.

"There's something wrong, Dan," Pel said. "We ought to break the door open."

"Why not? At the most it's only a lock."

They strained together, but it was tougher than it looked.

Carey called, "Wang!" and the giant pushed through the others on the stairs and came slowly down. Carey imitated pushing the door with his shoulder, and stood aside.

The Chinaman leaned against the door, and they heard him draw a long hissing breath. He strained, ever so lightly it seemed, and there was a little cracking sound and the lock of the door gave.

Pel pushed in under the giant's arm. The light in the room was full on. Rena Maroni lay on her back on the floor in the centre of the room, her head twisted sideways at a curious angle.

CHAPTER FIVE

MARIE gave a scream. She was standing at the door looking over Pel's shoulder. She began to wring her hands. Pel knelt down beside the body, his heart heavy within him, and was putting out his hand when Carey's fingers gripped his shoulder.

"Let her be, Pel," he said quietly. "Don't touch her. You others—" he turned to the group at the door—"don't come in. Better go back upstairs."

They turned at his command, and went slowly up the steps. Micklewitz the midget was crying openly. He went first, holding tight to Sapolio's hand like a frightened child. The starving man bent down and picked him up in his arms. The giant went up last, like a huge shepherd driving his sheep. Salvi glanced back once under the Chinaman's arm, his eyes full of fear.

Pel stood, his long fingers clenched. He was very pale, his head slightly lifted. "Dan," he said softly, "notice anything?"

"What?"

Pel sniffed. "Smell it?"

Carey's nose crinkled. "Somebody's been smoking a bad cigar," he said.

Pel pulled out a clean handkerchief and spread it over the dead face. Together they left the room. Pel pulled the door to.

Carey said, "I'll go upstairs and call the police. You wait here."

Pel sat down on the top step, suddenly weary, leaning against the banisters, watching the door behind which Rena Maroni lay dead.

Henri Sapolio came softly down the stairs—so softly that Pel started when he felt his hand on his shoulder. “Mon ami,” he said, “is it for zee police?” His head gestured to the door with the broken lock.

Pel nodded.

Sapolio looked round, anxiously. “There are many t’ings we do not understan’,” he said. “I say nozzing to anybody—only you. But I ask you now, Pel, about zis one.” He looked at the closed door. “Pel,” he continued earnestly, “per’aps she was zee woman of your frien’.”

Pel stared, puzzled. “Friend?”

“Oui—your frien’, zee college tie. You know—Monsieur ——” He looked round cautiously.

“Rogers?”

Sapolio nodded.

“Why do you say that?”

Sapolio spoke rapidly under his breath. “It is true,” he said, “I have never met M’sieur Rogers, but ’e was ’ere to-night. I go out for zee olive. I see ’im at ’er door—there. I see ’er open ’er door and she say ‘Mistaire Roger, *oh!*’ like that. ‘Mistaire Roger, *oh!*’ And ’e push in, an’ zee door close.”

Pel stood up quickly. “Have you told anyone?”

Sapolio shook his head vigorously. “I tell only to you,” he said. “Is he not your frien’?”

“He would not do a thing like that,” Pel said.

Sapolio put his hand on Pel's shoulder. "No," he said. "No. Your frien' 'e would not do zis mauvais t'ing. You mus' 'ave zee faith, my son."

Carey returned in a few minutes. "They'll be over," he said.

Together they sat on the stairs and waited, and very soon a car pulled up, screeching. The police arrived. Pel was glad to see Linley at the head of them. He rose and stood alongside Carey.

"I telephoned," Carey said.

Linley said, "You're Dan Carey, aren't you?"

"Yep."

The detective turned to Pel. "Know anything about this, Pelham?"

He pushed open the door Pel indicated, and led them in. Pel turned his head away as he lifted the handkerchief.

Over his shoulder Linely asked Carey, "Know her?"

"No. At least, I know her name."

"Pelham?"

"Yes," Pel said. "She's Rena Maroni, daughter of Paul Maroni."

"The circus man?" Linley looked at the dead girl again. "Poor devil!" he said. "Whoever strangled her meant to do a job."

Pelham told him how they had heard a scream and come down. Carey confirmed.

"Well, go back upstairs," Linley ordered. "Tell them no one must leave."

As they left, Linley called after them, "This the only apartment on this floor?"

"I think so," Pel said. "I don't know."

Linley turned to a constable. "Check up."

Pelham and Carey rejoined the party upstairs. Sapolio looked white and worn.

"Don't you worry, poppa," Marie said. "You go to bed. You mus' 'ave rest." She shushed him out with an apologetic look at the others, who sat round dejectedly, talking in whispers.

Marie decided to make coffee, and Bella went to help. Micklewitz, his eyes very red, smoked a cigarette. Every now and again he said, "Terrible. Terrible. It was so awful. So young!" The giant lolled back in his big chair, a pack of cards looking absurdly small in his hands. He kept his eyes on Pel.

By and by Marie and Bella returned from the kitchen with a tray of coffee. Pel and Carey handed the cups round. Salvi was leaning on the end of the sideboard, a cigarette between his fingers, gazing down at his patent-leather shoes. Estelle had just stretched out her foot and taken the coffee cup with her toes when the passage door opened and a voice said,

"Well! I never expected to see a show like this for nothin'."

Pel looked round, startled, to see Rorke stepping inside the room and closing the door after him. He leaned against it, and his eyes roved the room while they all waited silently.

Rorke said, "My heavens, what a collection!" His eye rested on Estelle, and a flush spread over the girl's face. She reached out her foot and placed the cup of coffee on a stool.

"I never would have believed it," Rorke said, and his eyes turned on Bella. "Even a tattooed woman—so-called," he sneered. "When did you have a bath last, blondie?"

Marie waddled toward him. "I don' know who you are, m'sieur," she said, "but I think you are a very rude man, an' if you stay 'ere someone will sock you. Yes?" She looked at Salvi for support, but he was still gazing at his shoes and made no move.

"Oh, yeah?" Rorke said, regarding the French-woman insolently. "Listen to me Mademoiselle from Armentiers—or isn't that your name?"

Pelham said, "It would be more proper, Rorke, if you told them who you might be."

Rorke's eyes shifted. "Well, if it isn't little Pel! I might've known you'd be mixed up with this bunch." He glowered round, and said in another tone, "I'm the police. On the next floor a woman has been murdered. She was one of your sort. Which of you did it?"

The blonde girl spoke tartly, "Do your own dirty work, Sherlock."

"Steady, Bella!" Carey warned, and turned to Rorke. "Surely you don't think—"

"That any of us could do such a thing." Rorke finished the sentence for him, mimicking. "Yes

I do. Any of you could have done it—leastways, anyone except the armless wonder.”

Carey's fists clenched, but Pel put a restraining hand on his arm. Tears started to Estelle's eyes. Involuntarily one foot lifted and crossed the other knee, and the toe pulled out a little black handkerchief that had been tucked into a pocket in her skirt. The slim silk-stockinged limb lifted, and she leaned forward slightly and dabbed her eyes.

Rorke stared, fascinated.

Micklewitz rose from a stool by Estelle's side, and with quick little steps crossed the room. He stood at Rorke's feet, looking up. “I understand, sir,” he said in his treble voice, “you are from the police. If that is so, you should conduct yourself more becomingly.”

“Hear, hear!” the blonde called, loudly.

Rorke, with heavy humour, pretended he couldn't see the midget. “Did I hear someone?” he asked, peering about everywhere except at the place where Micklewitz was standing.

“You heard me, sir.” The midget's treble rose.

Rorke looked down. “Bless me!” he said. “Whatever is it?”

The midget's face flamed. Tears of mortification started to his eyes. His tiny fists clenched in impotent fury. Then he suddenly lost all control. “Blast you!” he sobbed. “Blast you!” He seized Rorke's trousers near the knees, and kicked his shins with all the force at his command.

All Rorke's humour deserted him. He let out

a yell. "Why, you —— little ——" he cried, and his hand went towards the midget's collar.

But even as he moved, the Chinaman, Wang, rose slowly from his chair. His thick lips curled back from immense yellow teeth. A huge hand extended towards the plain-clothes man, the open palm came to rest on his face so that it was completely covered, then Wang merely pushed.

Rorke went flying. Like a shot from a gun he cannoned against Salvi and on to the wall. The force of the impact brought both men down, and they sprawled on the floor. Salvi was up, quick as a cat, but the heavier man did not rise immediately. His head had bumped the wall.

Bella cried, "Atta, boy! Oh gee, what a man! Get up, Sherlock, and fight." Marie tried to quieten her. Carey said in an undertone to Pel, "That's torn it." The professor gave a little giggle. "It's a publicity stunt," he cried hysterically. "I'm seeing a publicity stunt."

Salvi stooped and picked up a dish of fruit that had been knocked off the sideboard, and began stacking the oranges and apples and bananas. They kept falling off the dish and, painstakingly, he picked them up again. Everyone else was watching Rorke.

The plain-clothes man sat up slowly, still dazed, and gazed about him. The giant had subsided into his chair. His eyes were closed, and he was idly playing with the pack of cards, shuffling them gently. Micklewitz walked to the other end of the room and stood with his back to the rest, pre-

tending to look out of the window. His eyes scarcely reached the sill.

Rorke got slowly to his feet.

"By God," he said thickly, "someone's going to pay for this." He glowered about him, feeling his face. His lip was cut. "Where's that faker Sapolio?"

"Sapolio has gone to bed," Carey said.

"Oh, he's gone to bed, has he?" Rorke sneered. "Very convenient. Get him up."

Marie had had enough. She let go a stream of French intermixed with American slang. It is doubtful whether Rorke or any other policeman had ever heard anything to equal it.

Rorke retreated before the blast and backed into Linley, who entered at that moment and gestured peremptorily over his shoulder.

"I'll take over here, Rorke," he said, and Rorke with a sour look departed. Linley took in the scene with one quick glance. He saw Estelle wiping her eyes, he saw the midget's heaving shoulders, and noted the quick, frightened glance Salvi gave him before he went on with his self-imposed task of building up the fruit. His eyes swept over the enormous figure shuffling the playing cards.

Linley gave not the slightest sign that he was seeing anything unusual. He turned to Marie, who stood breathless after her outburst and ready to cry. "I am sorry to trouble you," he said. "If we all sit down I think we will be more comfortable."

Marie dusted an already spotless chair and set it for him. Micklewitz turned and stood staring, his eyes suspicious. The giant's eyes opened for a moment, looked sleepily at the detective, and closed again.

As he sat down, Linley said, "Pelham, I'd be glad if you would introduce your friends."

Pel named each in turn. Then Carey said, "This is Detective Linley, folks. He's a good sort. We've got to help him. You all know what's happened downstairs. Mr Linley will want to ask questions. We've got to tell him all we know." He looked round at them, and then went and sat beside Estelle.

All in the room stared at the police officer curiously, defensively.

Linley began by writing down their names and addresses, and asking where they would be during the next few weeks. Carey explained, to make it easier, that they were all in the city for the show carnival, and would be in the metropolis until it was over.

The detective said, "A woman has been murdered—brutally. She was one of your own people—an artiste. I am sure you want to find the fiend who did this foul thing." He paused, and looked about him. "But I have to tell you now," he went on, "that almost everyone in this room at the moment is suspect."

"Suspect?" Marie ejaculated, and looked inquiringly at Carey. "What 'e mean—suspect?"

"He means, Marie, that anyone in this room—" his glance flickered over Estelle, and he went on, "almost anyone in this room might have killed the poor girl below."

"But," Marie expostulated, "that is not possible. Did we not 'ear 'er scream, poor girl? Did we not all rush—"

Linley interrupted. "You heard a scream," he said, calmly, "but no one can say positively who screamed."

"It was a woman who screamed," Marie said, and several murmured assent.

"As a matter of fact," Linley said, evenly, "I think the doctor will tell you that the scream you heard could not possibly have come from the throat of the girl who was murdered."

They looked at him, puzzled. He spoke to no one in particular, but asked casually, "How soon after you heard the scream did you go downstairs?"

Immediately half a dozen voices replied, "At once."

Marie said, "We stood at the door and we 'eard it. M'sieur Pel and I were jus' going down to visit 'er—"

"You were going down to see her? Why?"

"Why?" Marie said. "M'sieur Pel, 'e say the poor girl is in a jam. She needs 'elp. 'E say 'Come down.' 'E want me to ask 'er to the party."

Linley's eyes narrowed a little. Pelham started to speak, but the detective said, "Hold it, Pelham, if you don't mind." He asked Carey, "How long

was it from the time you heard the scream till the moment you saw the body?"

Carey said, "Why, I suppose we hesitated a few seconds on the top of the stairs. It was kind of nerve-racking. Then Pel began to go down, and I followed. Pelham knocked on the door two or three times, but there was no answer. He called out, too, and then he said, 'There's something wrong, Dan'."

Linley asked, looking at Pelham, "What made you think that?"

"Why—" Pelham hesitated. "After the scream and getting no answer. We could see a light under the door."

"The scream might have come from the street," Linley suggested. But there was a chorus of protest.

"No, no!" Marie was vociferous. "She come from down there."

"Well," Linley said, "after Pelham said 'There's something wrong,' what then?"

Carey said, "We decided to break the door in."

"Whose idea was that?"

"I think Pel's," Carey said. "Anyway, it seemed the thing to do at the time. It occurred to me that there might be someone in there besides the girl."

"Go on."

"The door was tough," the carnival man explained, "so I called Wang."

At mention of his name the giant opened his eyes without moving his head.

"I made signs to him what we wanted—he can't speak much English—and he bust the lock. We went in, and—well, there she was." He made a gesture of distaste. "Pretty grim."

Linley's eyes dropped and focused on Wang's hands, which were gently manipulating the playing cards again. "What did the giant do when you went in?"

Carey looked surprised. "Why," he said, "I don't know. I didn't notice. We dodged under his arm when the lock broke. I guess he went back on the landing."

Linley looked at Pel. "I didn't notice," Pel said.

The detective said, "Then, from the time you heard the scream until you saw the body—how long was that?"

Carey considered. "Five minutes at most," he conjectured with a glance at Pel, who nodded confirmation.

Linley took out a cigarette and lit it. He leaned back in his chair. "That complicates matters," he said quietly. "It proves—please understand I am not making any accusation—it is possible that anyone—almost anyone—present in this room at this moment—strangled the girl down there."

Silence followed his words.

After a moment or two Marie burst out, "But, 'ow, 'ow, 'ow? We 'ear 'er scream."

"You heard a scream," Linley said. "But it was not the girl who screamed. At the time you heard

that cry, Rena Maroni had been dead an hour at least."

At Linley's words Salvi looked up quickly, staring unbelievably at the detective. The professor began, "But—" and stopped, then added in a whisper, "Oh, good heavens!" He put the tips of his fingers together, and pressed them to his mouth.

Carey said quietly, "That means, Mr Linley, that unless we can prove we all remained in this room since the party commenced, or since we arrived, we are not free from suspicion?"

"Something like that," Linley said. "From what I know already the party was going on up here while the girl was being murdered below."

Estelle burst into tears. "Oh, that's awful," she sobbed, and Carey turned to comfort her.

"But," Marie said in her blunt way, looking from one to the other, "Ev'ryone mus' go out sometime. Zis is old flat, very ancient. Zee lavabo she is outside at end of passage."

"I noticed that," Linley said. "It's the same on each floor. Any one of you might have gone out that door and slipped downstairs. I want you all to try and remember exactly when you did go out. I want you each to be able to tell me when you arrived at this apartment to-night, and when you left it after you arrived, and for how long."

"Oh, it is zee nonsense," Marie exploded. "Me—myself, I did not know zee girl."

"How many of you did?"

"I knew her, Mr Linley," the armless girl said softly. "I was with her father's show the season she left it."

"Thank you," Linley said, and made a note.

"I knew her well," Pel admitted.

"I had met her," Carey said, "but I could not say I knew her well. I had not seen her for over a year. I did not know she was in the city. She could not have been working—in her profession I mean."

The circus artists knew her professionally. They also were unaware that she was living in the city. The professor shook his head. "I know nothing," he said. Bella said, "I never met her. I've seen her up on the swing."

"And these gentlemen?" Linley inquired, indicating Wang and Micklewitz.

Carey said, "They could scarcely have known her. Neither has been in this country for more than a few weeks. They came from abroad."

Linley's glance fell on the giant's hands again. He said, "Did *he* leave the room during the evening?"

Carey thought. "Yes," he said, and added hastily, "but I suppose we all did. I know I did."

Estelle looked across the room at the curly-headed sword-walker. "Salvi, you knew her, didn't you?"

Linley wondered whether it was imagination, or was there a touch of cynicism in her voice.

Salvi's eyes darted to her. He shuffled his feet a little and looked down at his shoes. "Me?" he

said. "Oh, yes, sure I knew her." He looked up at Linley defiantly, and added, "But I ain't seen her for months."

The detective's eyes shifted to Estelle but she said nothing further. There was a curious little smile on her lips. Her legs were crossed, and her eyes were gazing at her bare toes which moved restlessly—almost, Linley thought, like agitated fingers. Suddenly she saw he was watching her. She uncrossed her legs and, with the same fluid movement, her uncovered foot slipped into its shoe.

Linley borrowed Marie's kitchen table, and took them one by one. He was quick and efficient, and was through earlier than Pel, waiting with the others in the lounge, expected.

"Thank you, ladies and gentlemen," he said, and turned to Marie. "By the way, where is your husband?"

"Henri—'e sleep, in there. 'E mus' not be excite. To-morrow 'e start 'is grand fast. 'E mus' rest."

"I see. Still, I believe in the long run it will be best to wake him."

Marie looked inquiringly at Pel, who said, "It will be best. He won't mind."

She shrugged her ample shoulders. "I go wake 'im when you say."

Carey shepherded his giant and the midget to the door. "My car's parked downstairs, Estelle," he said. "Can I give you a lift?"

For a brief moment the girl hesitated. She looked towards Salvi, but he was busy lighting a

cigarette and did not speak. She rose and said, "Thank you—Dan. That will be lovely. It's a bit awkward on trams." Her glance again travelled to the sword-walker. Marie put her arms about her.

"'Owever you manage on trams," she asked, "alone?"

Carey said, "Trust Estelle. She can do without anyone's help." He spoke a little contemptuously, and looked pointedly at Salvi. He touched the sleeve covering one of the girl's useless arms. "See this pocket let in here, Marie? It's full of pennies and small change. Tram and bus conductors just help themselves. Isn't she the little genius?" His arm went round the girl's shoulders affectionately as he gently urged her to the door.

The giant turned from the door and looked at Pel. He put his arms on his shoulders, towering above him, and spoke slowly, mouthing the words with difficulty. "You — come — see — Wang — more?"

Pel nodded vigorously. Carey said, "By gum, Pel, I believe the big boy would do anything you told him to."

Linley looked keenly at Pel and then at the giant, then nodded good night to those making their departure. He watched the giant bend his head as he stepped through the doorway, and noted the huge hands hanging limply by his sides. He thought, "If the fit took him he could strangle any one of us. And nobody could stop him. It would be like choking a canary."

When they had gone downstairs the detective said, "Wait for me, Pelham," and accompanied Marie into Sapolio's bedroom.

Left alone, Pel sat down and lit a cigarette. He sat smoking, staring in front of him, trying to recall all the things Rena Maroni had said to him. He could hear the mumble of voices in the next room. His eye caught sight of an apple which had rolled partly under a small table and escaped Salvi's attention. Vaguely he recollected the sword-walker building a pyramid of fruit. He stepped forward, stooped, and picked up the apple.

As he did so he saw something else. His hand stretched out to take it, and suddenly stopped. He straightened, put the fruit on the table, and carefully stubbed out his cigarette.

He waited, listening to the voices in Sapolio's room. Then, with a quick movement he pulled the handkerchief from his breast pocket and dropped it over the latch-key which was lying on the floor where Rorke and Salvi had fallen. The key was threaded with a little piece of red. Pel stooped and, as Linley returned to the room, dropped the handkerchief and key into the side pocket of his coat. He wondered whether the detective had noted the movement.

Linley refused Marie's offer of coffee, but had a drink.

"And poppa?" Marie inquired. "'E can make zee fast, yes?"

"Go ahead," Linley smiled at her. "At least

while he's in the glass house we can keep an eye on him."

Marie realized that it was meant for fun, and smiled back. Then she threw up her hands and gestured at the piles of uneaten cakes on the sideboard. "Ah!" she cried. "Les gateaux. All waste. But no! M'sieur Pel, you shall take some for the enfant, yes?"

In a moment she had two cardboard cartons, and was packing one with the pastries. "You fill one, Pel," she said. "Pick out which ones you like for the little one." He went to her side and began picking and packing the cakes, while Linley wandered about the room reading the inscriptions on the countless photos of Sapolio in various stages of starvation. The detective said over his shoulder, "I didn't know you had any children, Pelham."

"There's lots you don't know," Pel said.

Linley was unperturbed. He turned and regarded Pel quizzically as the latter corded his box of pastries. "You bet," he said.

A policeman had brought a chair from Rena Maroni's apartment, and was sitting on the landing. He stood up as Linley and Pelham came downstairs.

"All finished?" Linley asked.

"All cleaned up, sir. Everyone gone."

The detective pushed open the door and flicked on the electric light. The girl's body had been removed. Linley cast a swift glance round the room. He pointed to the photo on the mantelshelf. "That's Paul Maroni, isn't it?"

Pel nodded assent. Linley regarded it for a moment, hands in pocket. "Poor old blighter!" he said. "Bit of a shock for him." He walked to the door and inspected the broken lock. "I suppose, Pelham," he said quietly, "you saw nothing of a key when you found her?"

Pel shook his head.

"I don't mind telling you," Linley said, "that we can find no key to the door. I thought it might have been in the lock when you came downstairs. People leave keys there sometimes."

"I—we told you we had to break in."

"Yes, yes, of course."

Pel said, "If it would make you feel better I'd like you to look me over."

Linley said, half apologetically, "It's a job."

When he had searched, Pel said, "No key?"

Linley said, "Maybe Carey found it."

"He would have given it to you."

"P'raps you're right."

Pel picked up the cartons of pastry he had set down while Linley searched him.

"There ought to be a key to the room," Linley said, "but it wasn't here. Unless she swallowed it." He looked at Pel a trifle grimly. "After what I saw up there," he said, "anything's possible."

On the way into the city in Linley's car the detective said, "That chap Salvi—know him well?"

Pel said, "No—if you mean do I see him much. I never heard anything against him. Fancies himself, rather."

"As a performer?"

"Oh, he's a good performer. No, I meant with the dames."

Linley considered that. "And the dames?" he asked.

"Oh, they fall. He's not a bad-looking guy. Nice hair."

"Is it? I don't go much on curly hair for men."

"Curly—and strong," Pel said. "I've seen a seventeen-stone man lie flat on the floor and hang on to his hair while he bent over him. Then Salvi'd straighten and yank the seventeen-stoner to his feet without touching him with his hands."

Linley said, fishing, "He struck me as a bit short-tempered."

"Most freaks are."

"Ever seen him lose his head?"

Pel smiled. "Fellers like to pull his leg in pubs. Tell him he's a fake. That sort of thing. Salvi flares up, and they bet him he can't stand on broken glass. Just to show 'em, he'll pull off his shoe and sock and stamp on a tumbler till it's crushed. That's what they want. A free show."

"Nasty," Linley commented.

"He don't bleed."

"Why?"

"Search me."

The detective was thoughtful. He said after a while, "Salvi and that girl Estelle know each other pretty well."

Pel said swiftly, "Estelle? You wouldn't be—"

Linley shook his head. "I like to get all the

angles. She's a smart girl the way she uses her toes."

"She's a wonder," Pel said warmly. "Makes more use of them than most women do of their hands. Not only in show business. She's pretty independent. Knits, sews, makes her own bed, cooks. Of course, she's got special gadgets she's thought up herself. Plays the piano, too."

"*And she's pretty,*" Linley added. "I guess she's got everything but arms. Someday, I suppose, she might even marry."

"Why not?" Pel spoke a little heatedly.

The car was nearing Pel's tram stop. As it pulled up, Linley said softly, "A girl like that might be jealous."

"I wouldn't know," Pel said. He climbed out of the car, and Linley handed him his cartons of pastry.

"Might want to see you to-morrow," the detective said. "What time does Sapolio start his fast?"

"Seven thirty," Pel told him. "We figure to catch a few before the theatres get under way. I'll be at the joint most of the day, though."

Pel entered his home quietly, using the latch-key Linley had restored to him after he had tried it on the lock at Rena Maroni's apartment. He went noiselessly about the quiet house. He put the cartons he had brought home on to the kitchen table, and tiptoed into the room where his boy was sleeping. The light from the hall revealed the child, one little hand trailing outside the bed-

clothes. Pel lifted it very gently, and put it under the blanket.

He went back to the kitchen, and began to take Marie's pastry out of the cartons. He emptied one, placing the gay little dainties on a plate. He took a few from the second carton, and then carefully lifted out the handkerchief inside which he had wrapped the key that he found in Sapolio's flat.

When he had put all the pastry away he took the handkerchief and key into his bedroom and, opening a drawer in his dressing table, placed them inside and locked it. From the bed behind him, his wife called sleepily, "That you, Pel?"

"Expecting anyone else?" he inquired, grinning.

She was too sleepy to appreciate it. "Was it a nice party?"

"Yes."

"Anything exciting?"

"Not so's you'd notice." He began to undress. "Go to sleep. You're half-way there already." She was more than that. By the time he was in bed she was breathing regularly. Pel leaned over and kissed her lightly on the forehead. Then he settled down beside her. He lay on his back, his hands clasped behind his head, and, his eyes wide open, stared into the dark, thinking.

CHAPTER SIX

“**R**ULE out Estelle the armless girl, and possibly the midget, and any of ’em could have done it.” Linley was explaining the position to Superintendent Graham. “It’s a dump of a place—an old building converted into flats, one on each floor. The ground floor is just entrance. The girl’s apartment was on the first floor. Sapolio has the next, and the top’s been occupied for donkey’s years by an elderly couple with a complete alibi. They’ve got nothing to do with show business, and were out all the evening—with friends to dinner, and afterwards at the theatre with another party.”

“I see,” Graham said. “From what you’ve told me, anyone who was at Sapolio’s might have done it; but there’s another possibility.”

Linley nodded. “Everyone at Sapolio’s party was out of the room at one time or another. They don’t deny it. The midget even admitted going downstairs and using the lavatory on the next floor. Even the giant went out, but it’s practically impossible to question him. We’ll have to get an interpreter. I don’t think he’s strong in the head. But we’ve got something else.”

There was a rap on the door, and Rorke came in. “You sent for me, sir?” He had a slight discoloration around the right eye, and there was a piece of plaster on his chin.

“Come in, Rorke,” Graham said. “Good Lord! What have you been doing? Fighting?”

Rorke felt his chin. "The party at Sapolio's got a bit rough," he explained.

The chief looked incredulous. He turned to Linley. "You didn't tell me, Linley."

"I didn't know," the detective said.

"Just before you came in," Rorke explained. "Carey sooled his giant on to me."

"No one told me," Linley commented.

"They wouldn't," Rorke said, with a bitter laugh.

"Aren't you making a charge?" the chief asked.

Rorke shook his head. "Carey'd just love it. Can't you see the papers, sir? 'Wang Wongs Copper!' I'm giving 'em no free publicity. That is, sir, unless you—" he was adding hurriedly, when the superintendent interrupted.

"Perhaps you're right. What were you telling me, Linley?"

The detective glanced pointedly at Rorke before replying.

"Go ahead," Graham ordered.

"We found some letters in the girl's flat, torn into pieces—envelopes and all. They had been thrown into the coal scuttle. One letter might have been through the post. It looked like blackmail."

"Someone blackmailing her?" Graham asked.

"No. Apparently she wrote the letters. They were very short. They went something like this: 'If you don't let me have it I'll tell your fiancée. I won't wait.' They're not the actual words, of course. She had rented the apartment as Dora May."

Rorke said, "She might have posted one of the letters, and the person who received it might have brought it back, had a quarrel with her, and killed her."

Linley said, "It's a possibility. One letter had been written, enveloped, and sealed down, then torn into pieces. Perhaps she was going to send it and changed her mind."

"It's a guess," Graham said. "To who—I mean to whom was the letter addressed?"

"Skin Rogers, the bookmaker."

"Rogers!" Rorke exclaimed.

Linley asked, "Know anything?"

"I think I do," Rorke said, slowly. "Pel Pelham was at Sapolio's party."

"Yes," Linley said, "among others."

"Well," Rorke said, triumphantly, "I happen to know that Skin Rogers gave Pelham two hundred pounds recently." He explained the circumstances.

"What was the money for?" the chief asked.

"That's what we've got to find out," Rorke replied. "Maybe it was for services to be rendered."

"You mean," Linley said, "the girl was worrying Rogers, and Rogers gave Pelham two hundred pounds to get rid of her—somehow."

"It's an idea."

"No," Linley said, after consideration. "It's too crude. Besides, Pelham isn't that kind."

"Oh, I don't know," the superintendent put in. "I don't think you can say that, Linley. Almost

anyone's likely to do a murder, and none of them look much like murderers till after the deed."

"That's right, of course, sir," Linley said. "But Rogers! Pelham! It doesn't sound sense—not the way Rorke's put it."

"They went to the same school," Rorke said with a coarse laugh.

"Indeed?" The superintendent raised his eyebrows.

"State institution," Rorke explained. "They're both ——"

Linley interrupted with a gesture of distaste.

Rorke did not notice. Suddenly he struck his palm with his fist. "Just a minute, sir," he said. "I've just remembered something." He looked pleased. "It was at the Jockey Club, a little before I picked up Rogers's cheque and handed it back to Pelham. A page called Rogers to the phone. He shook hands with Pelham and said, 'Well, so long, Pel! You'll see the lady?' "

"Just like that," Linley said. "In the public bar with everyone around. I suppose he didn't add 'Choking would be a good idea,' or 'I'd advise choking,' or anything like that?"

Rorke glared, and the superintendent said, "Now, now, Linley!" He turned to Rorke. "Anyone else hear him?" he asked.

"I couldn't say," Rorke answered. "There was a lot of noise going on. You know what it is around a bar."

"Do I?" The superintendent's eyes twinkled.

"I mean to say——"

"O.K., Rorke," Graham said cheerfully. "By the way, did you find out where Maroni's circus was playing?"

"Yes," Rorke said. "I made inquiries." He handed his chief a list.

"Take the first train," Graham said, "and look the circus over. You might find out something from the artists—why she left the show, and so forth. Wire Maroni, Linley, and get the poor old bloke down. From what I've heard of him, he won't be very communicative. The boys and girls with the show might loosen up to you, Rorke, while he's away."

Rorke was looking at his watch. "I can make it if I hurry," he said. "There's a train at 10.15."

"Run along, then."

Linley said, as Rorke turned to go, "By the way, Rorke, find out what you can about that chap Salvi. He was with the show when the girl left it. Also, get the strong of that girl Estelle."

"The armless wonder?" He smiled sardonically. "Do you suspect *her*?"

Linley grinned at him. "She's as likely a bet as Pelham," he said.

Rorke stood with his hand on the door knob. "My money's on little Pel," he said. "I bet that bird hangs."

After he had gone Linley said, "He means he hopes he will."

The superintendent grinned. "You'll get Pelham in?" he asked and, as the detective nodded, he added, "What about fingerprints?"

"Plenty. Looks as if there'd been more than one man there."

"Was she that sort?"

"If she was she was quiet about it. There's a man's prints on the letter that was torn up but not sent, and several sets on the one that had been posted to Rogers. The postman's among 'em I suppose."

"Anybody at this—er starving man's party with a record?"

"I don't think so. They're a crude lot, but they're not bad."

Linley thought a moment. Then he said, "There's one curious thing. It mightn't mean anything. There are no children in the flat, and, as far as we have been able to find out, none have visited any of the apartments. But there's a set of child's prints on the door on the inside, less than two feet from the bottom. I thought it a little curious. That's the only place they occur."

The superintendent scratched his chin. "A child's?" The two men looked at each other, then the detective said, "I wonder. It could be."

"You mean the midget's?"

"Yes," Linley said. "But why?"

Graham said, "They're a queer bunch. Don't take anything for granted."

Very early that morning, before his wife awoke, Pel had risen and dressed. He went to a public phone and spoke to Skin Rogers. The bookmaker answered sleepily.

"Listen, Skin," Pel said. "Don't argue. This is important. Get out your car and meet me at the corner of ——" He named a street in an outer suburb. "As soon as you can. This is serious, Skin. There's a country race meeting tomorrow, isn't there? Pack your pyjamas and things. If anyone asks, you're going there."

He returned to his home, had a quick breakfast, and within the hour was at the rendezvous. He glanced around. There were very few people in sight. Rogers drove up, and got out of the car.

"What the——" he began, when Pel interrupted.

"Have a look at the back tyre."

Rogers walked to the back of the car, and as he did so Pel opened the door and climbed into the back seat. "Jump in," he said, "and drive slowly. I've got to talk to you."

Rogers did as he was bidden. He was frowning.

Pel leaned forward. In the little mirror he could see the reflection of Rogers's face. He watched it carefully as he spoke. "Have you heard anything, Skin?" he asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"About the girl you asked me to see."

There was a slight hesitation before Rogers said, "What about her?"

"She's dead."

In the mirror he could see Rogers's eyes, but he could read nothing in them. "Dead?" Rogers repeated, dully.

"She was murdered, Skin—strangled."

The car swerved suddenly. Rogers, recovering control, began to pull up.

"Don't stop," Pel said. "Listen, Skin. I'm your friend. I'll believe anything you tell me—see?—whatever you say. You didn't see her yesterday, did you?"

There was no answer.

"You weren't in her flat, were you?" Pel's voice was anxious.

There was another silence, while Pel gazed into the mirror. At last Rogers said, softly, "Yes, I was there."

Pel waited a moment. "I'm glad you told me, Skin, because someone else saw you."

"Who?"

"Sapolio. You—you didn't have any—trouble with her?"

Rogers mechanically honked at a schoolboy stepping off the kerb. He half turned in his seat. "Don't worry, Pel. I never killed her."

Pelham gave a sigh of relief. He sank back in the rear seat. "And there was no trouble?"

"Far from it."

The street was deserted. Rogers stopped the car.

"She wrote me a letter—another one. She told me you had seen her—that she was going back to her people. She said she was sorry for what she had done. She asked me to come and see her so that she could explain. At first I thought it was a trap, but it sounded all right."

He looked round at Pel. "I'm a mug with women. I went. She was on the level. She told me all about you, and that you were going to make it right with the old man. She showed me his picture. We got to talking about him and his shows. I told her that when I was a kid Paul Maroni was my hero. I wanted to grow up like him, and ride two horses at once. I used to cut scraps about him from the newspapers—photos and things, and pictures of acrobats and girls in tights.

"It was the time the big tents used to come right into the city, before pictures got so strong. I had quite a collection stuck in an old album. 'I'll bring it out and show you,' I said. She was quite excited. She said, 'I'd love to see it. If you'd lend it to me I'd like to take it back and show dad.' She thought it would make him feel that she'd been knocking round with his sort of people when, as a matter of fact, she hadn't.

"She was just hungry for them, Pel. I could see that. I was so glad the way things had ended I said, 'I'll go and get the scrap book.' She said, 'There's no hurry.' 'All right,' I said. 'You'll have it either to-night or to-morrow.' That was the last I saw of her. Something happened. I couldn't take the book back that evening. I meant to take it to-day."

He threw in the clutch. "Shall be go back?" he asked.

Pel said, "Did you keep the letter she wrote you?"

Rogers felt in his pocket, but Pel said, "Leave it. I better not finger it."

Rogers looked surprised.

Pel said, "There'll be enough prints in her flat already. Yours and mine. Heaven knows who else's. Anyway, the letter won't help, Skin. They'll say she knew you were soft and that it was only an excuse to get you into the flat again. When you got there something happened, and—"

"And?" Rogers prompted.

"And you killed her."

Rogers exclaimed, "But that's absurd."

"No, it isn't," Pel said. "Not the way they'll see it—the police I mean. They'll say, 'Rogers wants to get married. This girl's a nuisance. Either she wouldn't be bought off, or she wanted too much.' You lost your temper and—"

"You think so?"

"Either that," Pel said, simply, "or they'll say you paid me two hundred pounds to kill her for you."

Skin Rogers stared. He said, his face white, "What have I let you in for?"

"You gave me two hundred pounds for Sapolio's outfit. They'll make a nice play of that."

"Dammit, Pel," the bookmaker began, "it's so blasted—"

"I know, I know," Pel interrupted. He leaned forward and put his hand on the other's shoulder. "The trouble is, Skin, there's such a few people

in the world that would help a man out like you did. Never mind, pal. Remember the scrapes we used to get in together at the old school."

Rogers's eyes twinkled. "I don't forget 'em," he said. "Not a one of 'em."

"We always got out of 'em, didn't we?"

"Sure we did."

"We'll be all right, Skin. Only it might look bad for a bit."

"We'll go back," Rogers said, "and tell 'em the lot."

"No," Pel said. "If you don't mind, would you play it my way? I've got a hunch. It's only a hunch—but, anyway, it won't hurt for you to be not immediately available. I want to think. After all, we've got to think further than saving our own skins. I want to get that devil who got Rena."

"That's right," Rogers said. Then, after a moment, "I don't want it to look like I'm running away."

"You didn't see the papers to-day, Skin?"

"No."

"Right. You haven't heard anything. Ring through to your office and say you've decided to run up to the meeting. It's a nice day, anyway."

"What about you?"

"Drop me near a tram stop. Linley'll expect to see me. They won't bother you, Skin. They haven't your fingerprints at headquarters—or have they?"

Rogers grinned. "Nope. Not yet."

"There's nothing that they know to connect you with the business."

"What about Sapolio?"

"He won't talk. He's a good scout. And, anyway, he'll figure if he comes into it too much they won't let him start his fast. We nail him up to-night."

Rogers stopped the car and sat, pondering the matter. "O.K.," he said, as Pel alighted. "You're the doctor. Ring or wire me if you're in a spot. Criterion Hotel." He started the big car.

It was still too early for the business rush to the city, and there was no tram in sight.

Rogers leaned out of the car. "Listen, Pel," he said. "Remember when we pinched the green plums. The quack asked us what we'd been eating. We figured if we told him what we had inside us he'd know what we'd been up to. If we didn't tell him he wouldn't know what to do for us. Remember what the old boy said—'When in doubt, speak the truth.'"

Pel went to the shop he had rented. It was now gaily plastered with posters announcing Sapolio's forthcoming fast. A big sign over the door cried:

STARTING TO-NIGHT

Promptly at 7.30 p.m.

Sapolio will step into his Glass Prison.
See him nailed up in his Living Tomb!

In one of the windows a big card announced:

THE FIGURE BELOW INDICATES THE
NUMBER OF DAYS THE AMAZING
SAPOLIO HAS BEEN WITHOUT
FOOD

0

Can Sapolio reach his great objective?

Can any human being starve for 70 days—and
live?

Pel inspected these and other notices with satisfaction. He examined the ticket box with its sign—"Admission 6d. Open Day and Night"—then went inside.

In the centre of the shop an outsize in glass houses had been erected. There was a wooden wall about two feet high around the four sides, and a wooden ceiling, but the rest was glass. Sapolio's only escape from the scrutiny of his visitors, once his fast began, was behind a recess hanging from the ceiling like a shower curtain in a bathroom.

His bed was already in place, and there was an armchair, a deal table and two cheap kitchen chairs. Writing materials were already on the table, and in one corner of the "tomb" there were rows and rows of bottles containing soda water, and some large cartons of cigarettes.

Pel had just satisfied himself that all was in order when Detective Linley walked in. He glanced about him, interested. "Does he really do it?" he asked.

"I think he does," Pel said. "I'll know better when it's over."

Linley tapped the woodwork under the glass. "No sliding doors? No false bottoms?"

"And nothing up my sleeve," Pelham said. He pointed to a slit in a wooden panel. "That's his only communication with the great outside world. Just big enough to allow letters to go through, and autographed postcards (price sixpence) to come out."

"Does he get any letters?"

"Plenty. Mostly from cranks telling him he's got no right to do it. Funny, that."

"Why?" Linley asked. "It's not quite the thing, is it? I mean, is it right for a chap to take a chance like that—starving himself?"

"Plenty takes chances," Pel argued. "Ordinary folk, too. Steeplejacks, fellows fixing girders on high bridges, steeplechase jockeys, dirt-track riders, aeroplane stunts."

"I get you," Linley said.

Pel went on, "Anyway, the cranks are wrong. Cranks usually are. Sapolio starves to keep himself alive. He thinks, if he didn't starve every now and then, he'd die. He's got an eccentric inside."

Linley said, "You financed this set-up, didn't you?"

Pel smiled. "You haven't wasted much time."

"It's a job," Linley said. "Did you?"

Pel nodded.

"Cost a bit," Linley conjectured.

"I'll say."

"Best part of two hundred—with rent in advance, I mean?"

Pel laughed. "You're right almost to the penny. Must have had inside information."

Linley laughed too. "This the only thing you're in financially?"

"One thing at a time," Pel said, "is enough—and plenty. A lawyer who'd just come out of jail told me once he was only sent there because he had too many irons in the fire."

"How'd you get the two hundred, Pelham? Save it up?"

"I could say so."

"So you could," Linley said, suavely. "Where are you living?"

Pel told him.

"Mind writing it down?"

Pel took the envelope he was handed. Carefully he placed it against a glass pane in the "tomb," holding it there with his left hand. Then, very deliberately, he spread the fingers and thumb of his other hand, and pressed them against the envelope.

He handed it back to the detective. "That do?"

Linley looked a little rueful. "Was it as clumsy as all that?" he asked. "In a detective book I

read, the master criminal never knew what was happening, and the sleuth became an inspector."

"You'll find a duplicate set in Rena Maroni's apartment," Pel told him.

Linley put the envelope away carefully. He looked into Pel's eyes. "Thanks, Pelham." After a bit he said, "Anything on your mind? I'm a good listener."

Pel shook his head. "I'm too busy to-day. I've got all this—" He waved his hand round the shop.

"Of course," Linley said. "Well, after Sapolio's begun to thin out, we might have another yarn. We'll always set another knife and fork for you up at headquarters. Wish you luck with the show."

He was moving to the door when Pel called him back. He said, "Mr Linley, when you and the superintendent had me in the other day, what was eating you?"

"Now, *you're* asking questions." The detective smiled, but grew suddenly serious. "Listen, Pelham, you're no fool, but you've been away from this burg for a while and you've lost touch. Else you wouldn't be so dumb. You go places and you hear things. You get to know a lot of people. They talk in front of you. If you're not always on the level yourself, you're so near it you can always keep your balance.

"There's plenty like you, or almost like you. They're not bad, but money tempts 'em and they go a little way over the border. A green copper, fresh from the country, eager to serve law and

order and live on a high moral standard, would pull 'em in. But there are other coppers. Quite a long speech, Pelham."

"Yes." Pel waited.

Linley lit a cigarette. "You met the chief. Nice sort, eh?"

"I thought so."

"You thought right," Linley said warmly, and went on, meditatively, "He's rather fond of green coppers." He looked steadily at Pelham. Then he threw his match on the floor and gestured to the bottles of soda water. "Good Lord!" he said. "Don't tell me he's going to drink all that stuff. Well, ring me after the explosion."

Pel took a tram, alighted, and walked round to Sapolio's apartment. He mounted to the first floor, and paused at the door of the flat where Rena Maroni had died. The little address card had been removed. Gently he tried the door. It remained firm. They had put a new lock on.

Sapolio was sitting in his shirt sleeves, reading the newspaper. He looked up, lugubriously, as Pel entered. "Ah, my frien'," he said, tapping the paper. "Zis terrible t'ing. Maybe it kill our show, eh? It bring zee bad luck."

"Maybe it don't," Pel said.

Marie sat at the table, the playing cards spread before her. She swept them into a pack. "Zere!" she cried. "Encore! I tell zis foolish Henri

everyt'ing she will be okeydoke. Ev'ry time zee cards say good luck."

Sapolio's big eyes roved mournfully around the room.

"Buck up," Pel said. "Of course everything will be dandy."

Sapolio was not to be consoled. "I do not like," he said. "Marie, she fool me. Ev'ry time she say zee cards tell good luck. But she do not *show* me." He glanced reproachfully at his wife. "My Marie, she deceive me. I *know*. The bad card she come up—always, zee good fellow card—nevaire."

"Listen to 'im!" Marie exclaimed. "Listen to 'im, M'sieur Pel! 'E is zee ol' sour puss. You tell 'im pack 'is trouble in 'is kitty bag."

"Which is the good card?" Pel asked.

"For me," Sapolio said, "zee seven of diamon's."

"Wait till I wash my hands," Pel said, "and we'll try again. I'm in this, ain't I?" He went into the kitchen, and returned drying his hands on his handkerchief. "Come here, Sapolio," he said, "and pick out the good card."

Sapolio threw down the paper and crossed to the table. He took the pack of cards and, sorting them, found the seven of diamonds. "She is zee bes' card," he said, "but she nevaire come. Marie, you know she nevaire come. I watch you."

He picked the card up again and, holding it in front of him, glared at it. "Why you nevaire pop up?" he asked. "Why you run away from poppa?"

"He hasn't run away," Pel said. "Now listen, pop, listen Marie. I'm in the show, ain't I? I'm a partner, ain't I?" They nodded. "Well, while you're with me, everything's going to be fine and dandy. You'll see."

He held the pack of cards towards Sapolio. "Put your lucky card back," he said, and Henri obeyed. Pel shuffled the cards. Marie shuffled them. Sapolio shuffled them. Then he cut them, and began to deal them out face-downwards. Midway through he stopped. "There is the lucky seven for little Pel," he said, and turned it up. "What did I tell you?" he asked.

He shuffled again. He put out three stacks one in front of each of them. "Where is the lucky card?" he asked.

"It is in 'ere, I t'ink," Marie said.

"No, no, I t'ink 'e is 'ere," Sapolio said.

"You can't get away from him," Pel said. "Watch. He picked up the pack Marie had selected, and dealt the cards face-up. "He'll come out number seven," he said, and he did.

Marie was delighted, but Sapolio was downcast. "Nevaire does 'e come for me," he said mournfully.

"Ah, but wait," Pel said. He picked up the stack before Marie, and held it in one hand above his head. "Now," he said to Sapolio, "take your stack and deal. He'll follow you round. Count seven, and you'll find him."

Sapolio, doubtfully, began to deal the cards face-up. "One, two, three, four, five. The sixth card was the ace of clubs, and he shivered, hesitating to turn the seventh.

"Don't be scared," Pel said. "Good luck's chasing you round."

In trepidation Sapolio turned the next card.

"Mon Dieu!" Marie cried. "'E is zee seven of good luck. Oh, poppa, poppa, you see? It is Pel. 'E bring zee good luck."

Pel casually dropped the stack he had been holding aloft on to the table. He saw Sapolio pick the whole pack up and run through them rapidly. Then he got up and solemnly shook hands with Pel. He got down the cognac and poured into the little glasses. They were quite pleased about everything again.

When Marie left them for a moment, Pel said, "Did you tell Detective Linley about seeing Rogers?"

Sapolio looked at him reprovingly. "Mon ami," he said, "I tol' you I would not speak."

"Good," Pel said. "Thanks, Henri. Rogers didn't do it. I know."

Marie bustled back.

"Everything's okeydoke," Pel said. "Better come down to-night about seven, pop. And you, Marie, be there at exactly five minutes to eight. Pale make-up. And, don't forget, black dress."

"Like a widow already," Sapolio said with a grin.

She looked down at the colourful thing she was wearing, and made a little face. "I like zee colours," she said.

"You shall wear zee gay colours when poppa is out of danger," Sapolio said, and poked Pel in the ribs and roared with laughter.

As he walked downstairs, Pel took a seven of diamonds from the side pocket of his coat and restored it to the pack he carried in his upper inside pocket.

CHAPTER SEVEN

PEL went home and ironed his trousers. Not the ones he had worn during the day, but a pair of black evening pants. He carefully brushed his dresscoat and vest, and cast a critical eye over a white tie. He produced a top hat and, with the back of his sleeve, smoothed its sleek shiny surface.

His wife sat, shelling peas. She never interfered with Pel's professional wardrobe.

They had an early meal, and before 6.30 Pel was immaculately garbed. His hat was at a jaunty angle, a white scarf was wound round his neck.

He kissed the youngster. "Say, 'Here's hoping'." "Here's hoping, daddy."

His wife kissed him. "You look swell," she said.

He was standing in the bedroom, surveying himself in the long mirror. "So I do. So I do," he said amiably. He picked up a small suitcase. "I'll be seeing you," he said.

His wife said, "I do hope it's a success, Pel."

"It will be."

"Good luck, dear. I'll wait up."

"O.K. Tell you all about it then."

He allowed himself the luxury of a taxi. There would be some people hanging about the tomb. Dressed as he was, a taxi had publicity value. It lent distinction. It gave the show "class."

When the cab drew up outside the shop he alighted slowly, pleased to note that there were a number of curious people about already, awaiting

the arrival of the fasting man. With leisurely air he paid off the taxi, surveyed the lighting arrangements, and sauntered inside.

His staff was waiting. She was perched in the middle of the glass tomb, eating an apple and reading a book. Her eyes were glued to the page.

Pel stepped quietly over the woodwork and through the aperture left in the glass house. "'Lo, Delphine."

The girl jumped. "Gee, Mr Pelham, you scared me.

He nodded at the book. "Exciting?"

"I'll say. Have you read it? *Lord Ronald's Curse*."

Pel took it, and gravely inspected the cover depicting, in many colours, a bat-like gentleman opening a coffin in a vault. "It'll give you nightmare," he said. He gave her the book again. "How's your husband?"

He was a tiger-tamer who had been mauled by one of his cats.

"He's getting fidgety in hospital," she said. "Thinks the tigers'll forget him."

"When he gets into his uniform, no one could ever forget him," Pel said. He opened the suitcase and gave her the roll-tickets and dockets. "Check 'em, and get ready to open as soon as Sapolio arrives. Don't let anyone else in. Where's Cecil?"

"He'll be along, Mr Pelham. He's finishing his tap-dancing lesson early."

When the girl had gone behind the curtains dividing the entrance from the tomb itself, Pel

moved into the little recess which was to be Sapolio's dressing-room. He dropped on one knee, and moved a floor board that he had loosened during the day. A minute later he replaced the board, dusted his pants with his palm, and took his empty case into Delphine's ticket box.

Cecil, an extraordinarily tall youth, had arrived to take tickets and guard the door.

Sapolio came along shortly afterwards. He was in evening dress, and had a gay flower at his button-hole. "Mamma's," he explained, as he saw Pel's critical eye upon it. "You mus' not take it away, Pel."

From his coat pocket he took a rabbit's foot, and put it on the deal table. From a small case he removed pyjamas, which he placed under the pillow of the bed, and a dressing-gown which he draped over the end. He felt the mattress, and pursed his lips. From the bag he took razor and shaving materials and a mirror, which he placed on the deal table. Then he began unpacking books and magazines.

Pel eyed him for a moment, then stepped into the "tomb" and gathered up the reading matter.

Sapolio raised his eyebrows.

"It's all right, pop," Pel said. "You'll have them before we nail up. I've an idea."

Sapolio smiled, and looked at his watch. "All ready, my frien'. Cast me to the lions."

Pel carried the books and magazines, found some paper, and wrapped them carefully. He put

them on the floor of the ticket box, and gave Cecil a few instructions.

"Supper is served, Delphine," he said. "Let 'er go."

Cecil threw open the front doors, and Pel stepped outside. He carried a little cane, and tapped peremptorily on the window.

"And, now, gentlemen," he said, "it is my privilege to bring you face to face with the enigma of the age—the man who lives without food—Henri Sapolio, the world's champion fasting man. Sapolio! the man who is now about to embark on one of the most hazardous adventures in history, ancient or modern, defying medical science, setting the laws of nature at naught, by starving for seventy days.

"Imagine it, gentlemen! Seventy days without food—one thousand six hundred and eighty hours. For no less than one hundred thousand eight hundred minutes, no food will pass the lips of this remarkable man.

"Nailed up in a glass tomb, gentlemen, watched day and night, ever and always the cynosure of all eyes, Sapolio will carry on his grim task. You are just in time to meet him, talk to him, question him—aye, shake his very hand—ere the grim hour arrives and he steps into his living tomb."

Delphine said from the window, "All tickets here. Sixpence."

Pel tapped the window again. "But, gentlemen, it is not for sordid gain that this man Sapolio fasts week after week in his glass prison. The medical

fraternity watches him with breathless interest. The news flashes around the world of science. Another miracle has happened! Sapolio has starved again! For seventy days, not a morsel of food has passed his lips! The doctors are confounded. Scientists reel. They cannot understand it.

"Cables come from Vienna, Paris, London, New York, seeking news and confirmation of this miracle which *you* are privileged to see taking place beneath your very eyes for the small sum of sixpence.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he continued (for by this time there were women in his audience), "on the inside carpenters are waiting, hammers in hand, ready to nail this dauntless man into his self-sought prison. Think of it, ladies and gentlemen! Sapolio subsisting solely on soda water, day after day, growing gaunter and gaunter, fighting the dreadful pangs of hunger, facing with unparalleled gallantry the grim task he has set himself—of starving for seventy long days.

"And you, ladies and gentlemen, are privileged to see this remarkable man actually enter the glass tomb and shake his hand in farewell, all for the small sum of sixpence."

There was a steady trickle through the door, as he continued in a minor key, "Think of it, ladies and gentlemen—think of it! Can you imagine seventy days without food? Can you imagine *one* day without food? You who have never missed a single meal—"

"I 'ave." A voice spoke from the crowd in front.

"You have?" Pel pointed his cane. "And why, sir?"

"Because I 'aven't the price of it, that's why." A plumpish, unshaven man in ragged clothes stepped forward.

Pel thrust his hand into his trouser pocket. "Then, sir," he said, grandiloquently, as one bestowing a magnificent gift, "take this with the compliments of Henri Sapolio, the starving man, who knows only too well the dreadful pangs of hunger."

The unshaven fellow stepped forward eagerly, and took the ten-shilling note Pel held conspicuously between thumb and finger. "Bless you, guv'nor!" he cried hoarsely. "You're a white man," he showed the note to those about him. Then he clutched it fiercely to his breast. His eyes rolled. "Food!" he cried, hoarsely. "Gawd, 'ow I need food!"

His eyes darted this way and that, suddenly fixing themselves on a shop front opposite. "Food!" he muttered again and, pushing his way through the crowd, went limping across the road. They watched him with silent interest, as he disappeared through the portals of a cheap restaurant.

Pel tapped the window with his cane. "The great fast is about to begin. On the inside . . ."

Customers began to trickle to the ticket box. When they hesitated, Delphine's bright eye caught and hypnotized them. "There's your ticket, sir," she would say, as if they had already asked for it.

They were ashamed to draw back. They looked a little self-conscious, like small boys discovered by their school-mates wheeling the baby's perambulator.

They made little derogatory remarks. "I'll be the mug," one said, and a stranger looked at him and laughed as they passed in together. They seemed glad of each other's company. Later on they were to have a drink together, and after that they nodded to each other when they met in the street, and one day they found each other at the same race meeting, and had a bet together which came off very well indeed.

One went home with the other, and met his sister and fell in love with her, and eventually married her in a large church, with a robed priest, and a satin cushion to kneel upon, and little choir boys who were really little devils but looked like angels in their spotless gowns—and sang like them, too—to say nothing of half a dozen lovely bridesmaids with expensive bouquets.

But the bride never, in her wildest dreams (and she had many), suspected that she and her husband had been hurled into matrimony, so to speak, by a sixpence thrown contemptuously into a little window to pay for a ticket to see a man starve.

And, of course, Sapolio never knew either. As the customers entered he shook hands solemnly until there were too many for such personal attention. The early birds thereupon began to put on airs, relating to the late-comers the intimate things Sapolio had revealed when they came in—about

his weight, his tremendous appetite under normal conditions, what he did to pass the time, and how he managed certain affairs about which they had inquired in undertones when curiosity could no longer be kept in bounds by good taste.

There wasn't one of them who didn't enjoy his moment of reflected glory. Next morning, they told the fellows in the office and factory, speaking casually, "I had a yarn with that starving chap, Sapolio, on the quiet, and he told me . . ."

Pel's persuasive tongue coaxed so many in that at length Sapolio had to retreat into his glass house, where he stood talking to them as they crowded about the aperture in the tomb, like a train traveller, about to set off for distant parts, bidding farewell to his friends on the platform.

When the room became uncomfortably crowded, Pel left the front and pushed his way to Sapolio's side. He climbed into the glass house and stood on one of the deal chairs. Looking down upon the Frenchman he said solemnly, "Henri Sapolio, here in the assembled presence of these ladies and gentlemen, I ask you solemnly to declare that you undertake this task of starving for seventy days at your own peril."

Sapolio replied in a deep voice, "I do."

"You freely permit yourself to be imprisoned in this glass tomb, and agree that no food shall pass your lips until the conclusion of your fast?"

"I do."

Pel turned to the audience. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "there, in the corner, you see the

soda water on which Sapolio will subsist. It is Swish soda water—the best that money can buy—but it is not food. Alongside are boxes of Park Avenue cigarettes—the starving man's favourite smoke. You are at liberty to examine the bed, the desk, the disrobing chamber." With his cane he indicated the curtained recess. "And, if you wish, you may search Sapolio to see that he has no sandwiches concealed on his person."

There was a little laugh.

"Don't laugh, my friends!" Pel exclaimed. "Sapolio insists. 'Let them search me,' he said to me to-day. 'Let them search so that they may be really sure I carry no food in concentrated form—no chocolate, no tablets.'"

Sapolio raised his arms above his head, inviting inspection. One man made a half-hearted exploration into the side pockets of his coat, but the rest appeared satisfied to trust to Sapolio's good faith. A woman poked a curious nose into the curtained recess, and one or two men lifted up bottles of soda water, held them to the light, and gravely inspected the contents.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, with your permission, we will seal Sapolio into his living tomb."

From the ticket box outside, one could hear Delphine: "On the inside they are now about to nail the starving man in his glass tomb. Admission sixpence."

Pel said, "Are you ready, Henri Sapolio?"

Sapolio said, "Yes," in a voice deeper than ever, and added gravely, "But, first, I wish all my

good frien' 'ere to smoke a last cigarette wiz me." He broke open a big box of Park Avenues, and handed them round. They were eagerly accepted. Pel smiled admiringly. Sapolio had thought that one up himself. It was good, cheap publicity. There were plenty of cigarettes, and they got them for the advertisement.

When all had been served, and one or two women had begged extra ones as souvenirs, Sapolio turned to Pelham and said, "And now, my frien', good-bye."

"Good-bye, Sapolio." Pel contrived to work a little tremor of emotion into his voice.

The affecting scene was interrupted by the arrival of Cecil, the lanky youth, who came forward with a brown-paper parcel, and handed it to Pel with a whispered word. Everyone saw Pel lift his eyebrows in surprise.

"Thank you," he said, softly. "Thank His Excellency very much indeed. It is very kind of him."

He turned to Sapolio and said in an undertone, but loud enough for those in front to hear, "A parcel of books from the Governor."

Sapolio was genuinely surprised. He recovered quickly. Smartly he came to attention, his heels clicked, and he gave a military salute. Only those in front had heard Pel's whispered words, but they quickly passed the news to those behind.

Delphine in the ticket box said loudly to Cecil on the door, "What do you think? The Governor

sent a parcel of books to Sapolio to read while he fasts."

Two girls passing, on their way to the theatre, overheard the remark. They told two others as they sat in the stalls, waiting for the show to commence, and the man behind them, overhearing, told his wife that the Governor had sent a present to "that starving man down the street." And so it gradually carried through the auditorium, until an usherette heard the whisper and told her friend at the door that the Governor had been at Sapolio's opening.

After the curtain fell, quite a number who had been at the theatre stopped, out of curiosity, and paid their sixpence to see Sapolio, who by this time was fast asleep on the mattress kindly supplied by Messrs Beankins Pty Ltd.

"Good-bye, Sapolio," Pel said. He had placed the Governor's books on the desk and again taken the fasting man's hand. He stepped over the woodwork into the shop proper, and beckoned the two carpenters who were waiting to fill in the remaining panel of the tomb.

He looked at his watch. "Nail him up!" he cried dramatically, and they came forward carrying the big sheet of glass between them. At that moment, however, there was an interruption.

"Where is he? Where is he? Where is my 'usban'?" a voice cried, and Marie burst into the shop.

"Sapolio!" she cried. "Henri!" She rushed at

him, throwing her arms about his neck, kissing him again and again.

"Marie," he said, "you should not 'ave come. You promise not to come."

"Ah, I could not stay away," she cried. "I could not bear to t'ink of you nailed up in zis dreadful tomb. Oh, my dear, do not do zis dreadful t'ing. Please—for Marie's sake." She gazed tearfully into his face, her own very white above the sombre black dress, her lips colourless.

Gently her husband put her from him. "I shall be all right, cherie," he said. "Do not worry."

Delphine had left Cecil in charge, and now came forward. She put her hand on Marie's plump arm.

"Take 'er away, please," Sapolio said, brokenly.

Pel said, "Look after her."

Delphine led her away. They could hear her sobbing at the entrance. But they did not hear her say, between sobs, "Good business, eh? 'Ow much you take?"

Sapolio folded his arms. "Nail me up," he ordered, standing like Sydney Carton awaiting the guillotine, while the callous carpenters set the glass in place.

Sapolio's fast had started in earnest. As Pel walked towards the door, a man said, "D'you think he'll do it?"

Pel was dubious. "He's as brave as a lion," he said. "Pity his wife upset him like that. He'll be all right for three or four days, but by Saturday he'll be screaming at me through the glass to give him food, raving that he'll break the glass if I

don't. That's the critical period. Well," he sighed, "we can only hope for the best."

The visitors sauntered about the shop, staring into the "tomb," with the deepest interest, watching Sapolio doing the most commonplace things. As for Sapolio, he took no more notice of them. He bent down and fished out a card from his suitcase, and hung it from a pin near the letter slot. It read:

PHOTO POSTCARDS OF SAPOLIO

3d.

Personally Autographed, 6d.

With Sapolio's fast successfully inaugurated, Pel spruiked in front, off and on, until after the theatres were out. Then Delphine and the lad Cecil were dismissed, and the night watchman came on duty, an old man, rather stooped, who had once been the understander in an acrobatic act, bearing the weight of ten persons on his shoulders. He was to remain until eight in the morning.

Pel went home, and had supper with his wife. He stowed away the night's takings, and they went to bed. He had told her nothing of Rena Maroni. Now that Sapolio was on his way, he could turn his attention to other matters.

With the light out, he lay on his back, his hands clasped behind his head, his eyes wide open, staring into the dark. He forgot about Sapolio in his glass tomb. He began to think of Rena and Skin Rogers. He tried to recall every word the girl

had said to him. He got a mental picture of the letter Rena had sent to Rogers and which he had torn up, and—his heart stopped a beat.

Suddenly he remembered tearing up the letters and throwing the pieces into the coal scuttle in Rena's apartment.

Were the scraps still there when Linley went in? That would be bad. Bad for him, bad for Skin, bad for poor old Paul Maroni, sick at heart already, he guessed. It would be terrible for him to believe that his girl was a blackmailer.

He recalled everything Skin had told him at the club, and in the car the morning after the murder. He remembered the scrap book Rogers had kept all these years, and, all at once, he began to smile. Two hours had passed since he went to bed, and he rose silently and went to the bathroom. He washed his face and hands in cold water and, refreshed, went back to bed.

Again he lay on his back, his hands under his head, and stared into the dark. But this time he was not thinking of Rena Maroni or Skin Rogers. He believed in one thing at a time. He was thinking of Sapolio.

Let's see—to-morrow's Tuesday. On Saturday Henri would complete his fourth fasting day. That would be just right. Sapolio could start his tantrums in the morning, and work 'em up in the afternoon. That would start the gossip. Saturday night's business ought to be pretty good.

He began rehearsing little phrases. "Break that glass and you break your contract, Sapolio."

He got a mental picture of Sapolio, wild-eyed, brandishing a chair, and, almost simultaneously, one of Marie in her great flowered apron, peering anxiously into a huge pot and stirring with a big wooden spoon.

He smiled happily, thought once or twice, with satisfaction, of the night's takings, wondered what the postcard sales would be like (he was to have thirty per cent of them), turned on his side, and was immediately asleep.

He did not wake until his wife nudged him. She was standing at the side of the bed with a breakfast tray.

Early in the morning he sent an urgent wire to Skin Rogers:

Owing extraordinary circumstances advise you return soon as possible.—Pelham.

He went to the "tomb," saw that the watchman had been relieved by Cecil, and had a peek at the docket showing the night's takings. He was more than pleased. Quite a few visitors had called during the stilly hours.

Sapolio was up, sitting at his table, busy shaving. Pel waved the docket, and he came over, his face covered with lather. Pel slipped a copy of the docket through the letter slit. Shaving brush in hand, Sapolio picked it up. His eyes opened wide.

"Bon," he said. "It is good, eh?" He liked to earn money while he was sleeping.

"Better than breakfast," Pel called. He had to put his mouth close to the glass. Sapolio grinned. Pel looked round cautiously. At the moment there were no visitors. He put his lips close to the pane and said, "We'll have a cranky Saturday. O.K.?"

Sapolio nodded.

"Understand? Saturday."

The fasting man put the shaving brush down, and flicked over the pages of a desk calendar. He pointed to SATURDAY, then picked up a chair and made a threatening gesture. He put the chair down, and nodded his head. Pel grinned back at him, and Sapolio went on with his shaving.

Later, while Pel was spruiking in front of the show—he wore a smart morning suit, with lavender gloves and a slick bowler—Linley came along.

"Hello, Pelham," he greeted. "Know where Skin Rogers is?"

"Yes. Up country. I wired him to come back pronto."

"You did? Why?"

"Thought you might like to see him. Brother Rorke saw him give me a cheque. He'll want to make mischief about it. Rogers knew Rena Maroni, you know."

"Did he, now?"

"He'll ease your mind about it when he comes back." Pel directed a passer-by to the ticket box. He said sarcastically to Linley, "As if you didn't know where Rogers was! You'd never dream of inquiring at the Jockey Club."

"Good Lord!" Linley said. "Is there such a place?" He opened his eyes in mock astonishment, then added seriously. "Frankly, Pelham, there's something needs explaining."

"Count on us," Pel said. He turned to an inquiring client. "No, sir, he doesn't eat in the middle of the night. Call any time you like. There's no deception. This gentleman—" he indicated the detective—"is from the police. We've asked them to keep a friendly eye on us."

"You'd make a talking point of your grandmother's funeral," Linley said, when the man had gone inside.

"It's a job," Pel said, stealing a phrase. He hammered with his cane on the glass window. "Step up. Step up. Sapolio, the fasting man, is facing his first foodless day. He is now shaving. See the starving man shave."

"That won't cut any ice," Linley commented. "Who wants to see a man shave?"

"Who wants to see a duck—except on a stage? Put a pair of live ducks in a farm scene on a stage, and people talk about 'em. Maroni down yet?"

"He should be here this afternoon."

"Tell him where I am."

"I will. You liked his girl, didn't you?"

"Sure I liked her. You'd have liked her yourself. She was a straight-goer."

The detective gazed at him curiously. "Is that so?" he said, without emphasis. "Anything else I can do for you. I'm always at your service, you know."

"Thank you." Pel removed his bowler and gave a sweeping bow.

Linley had scarcely gone when a battered figure crept up to Pelham. "I thought I'd come and thank you," the man began, looking carefully about.

"It's all right, Ricketty," Pel said. "Pop in. There's a back door. Go right through and wait in the yard."

Five minutes later, Pel sat on the steps alongside the tramp. "For a beginner you did a good job," he said. "Overacted a bit, though. Don't roll your eyes so much. They'll think you're daft. I want 'em to think you're hungry."

"I getcher, Pel."

"Been up against it, Ricketty?"

"It's been tough lately, Pel. This is no good to a man." He thrust out a crippled foot.

"Been in jail?"

"Who hasn't?"

There was an obvious retort, but Pel only smiled.

Ricketty went on, "I had a steady job as a cook, but I left. Couldn't stand the sight of food any more. And now I run into this."

"Shearers' cook?"

"No, with a tent outfit. And did those fellers eat!"

"Whose show?"

"Maroni's Circus. I heard 'em say you were with 'em once."

Pel said, "Were you there when Rena Maroni left the show?"

Ricketty said, "Funny you arstin' that. It was through her, in a way, I got the job. I see her when she run away with that feller."

Pel said, "She was murdered down here. The night before last."

Ricketty's eyes widened. "You don't say," he said at last. "By who?"

"No one knows," Pel said. "Perhaps what you've just told me may help."

"Well, what d'you know about that?" Ricketty sat a bit closer. "Listen, Pel," he said, "I ain't told no one this. Old Maroni said he'd set his elephants on me if I did. So I was scared. He's the kinda chap that could play merry hell for all he's only a handful. But I don't care now. His girl run away, all right—with a feller. I seen her on Billiga sidin'. She had a suitcase with her, an' along comes this feller and picks it up and puts it in his car, large as life."

"What sort of a feller?"

"Tall bloke. Dark."

"Who was he?"

"Now that," Ricketty replied, with elaborate sarcasm, "I really didn't arst him. All I know is he had a very nice car—a very nice car, indeed. The sorta car I'd like to own meself. A Belmont."

Suddenly Pel felt a little sick. He stood up. "Don't talk about this, Ricketty. You see how it is. The girl was murdered. You don't want the police asking you questions."

Ricketty said frankly, "I don't want nothin' to do with no police."

"All right," Pel said. "Don't worry." He waited a moment. "This chap you saw in the car with Rena Maroni—the one in the Belmont. You'd know him again?"

"Yes," Ricketty said. "I'd know him again."

Pel said casually, "Salvi, the sword-walker, was in Maroni's show, wasn't he?"

Ricketty nodded. "Smart Alick if you arst me, with his curly hair and all." He gave a respectable imitation of a shudder. "Gets me how the women fell for him. Made me sick the way some o' those country wenches looked at him. Indecent I call it. Everywhere the same. And the girls in the show, too. Even Estelle."

"Estelle?"

"Piece with no arms. Used a knife and fork with 'er toes. Fair gave me the shivers till I got used to it. Good-lookin' bit, though. I had to laugh, though."

"Laugh? What at?"

"The way she fell for Salvi. Gee, it was funny."

"How d'you mean, funny?"

"Well," Ricketty drawled, "her waitin' in her dressin'-tent, peekin' out, lookin' for him, wantin' him to get fresh with her—and her with no arms and all." He chuckled at the recollection.

Pel did not speak at once. He leaned down, and lifted the tattered trousers revealing Ricketty's lame foot. "Anyone ever laugh at that?" he asked.

Ricketty regarded him with surprise. "No," he said. "Let me ketch 'em!"

"But they did once," Pel said. "Think back a bit, pal. When we were at school together—me and you and Skin Rogers. Remember the baker's boy who called you names? He made fun of your foot—something you couldn't help. You were a soft little bloke then. And Skin Rogers went after him."

"And beat the tripe out of him," Ricketty cried, a reminiscent gleam in his eye. "That was a long while ago, Pel. I wonder what became of Skin? I ain't seem him in twenty years."

Pel gave something like a sigh as he put his hand on the other's shoulder. "Stick around, pal," he said. "I'll find plenty for you to do."

When, late that evening, Rogers came back to the city, he drove direct to the street in which Pel lived, parked the car opposite a vacant allotment, and waited. About midnight Pel showed up.

"Here I am, Pel."

Pelham climbed in beside him. "I sent the wire, Skin," he said, "to make it look better. There's something else, though. I tore up the letter she wrote you, and threw it into the coal scuttle in her apartment. I forgot about it, but I'm pretty sure Linley found it, with another one she was going to send you."

Rogers considered. "What are you going to do?"

"Dad Maroni's in town," Pel said. "First they'll show him her body. Then, if they've got them, they'll show him the letters, maybe. It'll about

kill the old man, because it'll look as if his girl was a tart and a blackmailer."

He paused. "You don't know Paul Maroni, Skin. I can imagine how he felt when Rena cleared out and left the show flat. And it wasn't only a matter of letting the show down. She didn't just leave in the ordinary way. Some fellow enticed her away. Some swine with a Belmont car—like this."

There was a little silence before Rogers said, "Meaning what?"

"Meaning," Pel said deliberately, "there's are a lot of swines and a lot of Belmonts. I'm wondering which swine and which Belmont."

Rogers had been sprawling negligently, half facing Pel in the semi-darkness. He straightened abruptly. "O.K.," he said. "If that's how it is. I thought I had a pal. I'll drive in and see Linley."

Pel said, "The past is past, Skin. If it weren't for that fellow and his blasted Belmont, this thing wouldn't have happened. We'll see Linley together. If it's the last thing I do I'm going to try and save Paul Maroni from thinking his girl was a blackmailer."

He got out of the car. "I'll pick you up at the club at 10. O.K.?"

"Anything you say." Rogers's voice was cold. He drove off without calling "Good night."

CHAPTER EIGHT

PEL was at the tomb at 8.30 next morning. Sapolio was taking a constitutional, while several people stood outside the glass house watching. Up and down he walked, up and down, like a caged animal. Pel pushed the docket showing the night's takings through the letter slit.

Sapolio picked it up, and frowned to see that the figures were down a bit on the previous night. Pel wasn't worried. He expected the night business to be quiet, until the stunting started.

Ricketty called in, and Pel spoke to him earnestly for some minutes. At 9.30 Pel went out and rang Linley from a public phone. Fifteen minutes later he began to walk slowly round to the Jockey Club, and waited for Rogers. Skin joined him at 10 precisely. He nodded curtly, and strode through the entrance. His Belmont was at the door. They got in, and Rogers started the car.

They drove in silence. As Rogers stopped the car in front of the police office, Pel saw Ricketty leaning against a post a short distance away, staring at them.

Linley saw them at once.

"Thanks for coming around, Mr Rogers," he said. They sat down, and the detective offered cigarettes. "You knew Rena Maroni, Mr Rogers?"

Skin nodded.

"When did you see her last?"

"The afternoon of the day she—died."

"At what time?"

"I think about 5.30."

"Are you sure about that? It wasn't later?"

"Maybe a minute or two—no longer."

"Where did you go after you left her?"

"I went to a gazette. There was a race finish I wanted to see."

Linley made a note. Without looking up he asked, casually, "Did you part good friends?" Then his eyes went direct to Rogers.

The bookmaker stared back at him. Smoke trickled from his nostril. "Absolutely," he said. "I was going to see her again the same evening, or the next day."

"You didn't go back?"

"Nope."

"Why?"

"Something turned up. It wasn't a definite appointment."

Linley pulled open a drawer. He took out two sheets of pink paper, and spread them before him. Pel saw at a glance they were torn scraps carefully pasted together to reconstruct the originals. Attached to each was a pink envelope, similarly reconstructed.

"Please look at these letters and tell me whether you have seen them before."

He did not offer to pass them, and Rogers rose and went to the back of his desk slowly, and looked over his shoulder.

"One of them," he said at last, and indicated with his finger.

"May I see?" Pel asked. "I think I am concerned. I believe I tore them up. Did you find them in the coal scuttle?" Without waiting for Linley's consent, he rose and stood behind him, and peered over his shoulder, too. With one hand he gently pulled the sleeve of Rogers's coat. "Yes," he announced, "they are the ones I tore up."

"Why?" Linley asked, looking up at him. Pel's face was only a foot away from the detective's, but his eyes did not flicker.

"Why? Why not?" he asked.

"They are blackmailing letters?" Linley rose abruptly and faced Rogers.

"Blackmail," Skin repeated, helplessly.

Suddenly Pel began to laugh. Linley swung round, and gazed at him in astonishment. Rogers looked equally surprised.

"Oh, Mr Linley," Pel said. "I'm sorry—but it's funny."

"I don't see anything funny," the detective said.

"You will," Pel said. "The letters refer to a scrap book Rogers used to keep. When he was a darling little boy he used to fall in love with girls in tights. He wanted to be a circus rider. Tell him, Skin."

As Linley turned, Pel flashed a signal.

"Well, Rogers?" the detective said.

Skin Rogers looked down his nose. "It's kinda silly," he said, and Pel breathed again as he continued, "When I was a kid I was crazy about cir-

cuses. Maroni's was a big show in those days. Used to come into the cities. I used to cut out of the papers the pictures they printed showing the performers. Paul Maroni was my idol. I had a lot of photos of him riding bareback, jumping through fiery hoops—that sort of thing. There were some of Rena—a little tot then—riding on a pony.”

He paused. “I told Rena about the book,” he continued. “She was crazy to see it, but I kept on forgetting. It was a bit of trouble to dig out. She wrote to remind me, and was apparently writing again when Pel breezed in and told her he knew me. He said he'd see that I dug the thing out.”

“She was keen to get it, to take back to the old man,” Pel added. “She thought it would help her to bridge the gap.”

“What gap?”

Pel told him. His voice hardened a little. “Some fellow induced her to run away from the old man's show—with him. It pretty nearly broke Maroni's heart, I should imagine.”

“I've seen Maroni,” Linley said. “He didn't say much. I'm learning.”

He considered the letters spread before him. “Tell me exactly how you come into her life, Pelham,” he said.

“I've known her a long time,” Pel told him. “Since she was a bit of a thing. I worked with her dad's show. But I didn't know she was in the city. I found her by accident. I was on my way to

Sapolio's flat one day and I met her on the landing. She told me she was going back to the circus. She told me about Skin and his scrap book. Told me she was going to post the letter.

"I told her it wasn't necessary. I'd see that Skin brought it along. I tore the letter up."

Linley looked down at a letter before him and read, "'When I'm on to a good thing I stick. Are you going to part up, or shall I tell your fiancée?'"

"She was kidding when she wrote it," Pel said quickly. "It had a lotta pictures of girls in tights—the book I mean. It was a joke between 'em."

Linley nodded slowly. "I see. That disposes of one letter—the one she didn't send. What about the other one?" He read, "'You've got it. Why shouldn't I have it? I expect it, and want to hear from you soon.'"

"I musta left it in her apartment," Rogers said. "I don't remember. I kep' on forgetting about the book."

Linley put the letters back in the drawer. He said, "Well, thanks for calling. We'll let it ride." He opened the door for them. As they passed through he said, "Good-bye, Rogers," and looked at Pel quizzically. "So long, Galahad."

When they were in the Belmont Skin asked, "Shall I drop you at the joint?"

Pel said, "Thanks."

As the car moved smoothly down the street Rogers said, "That was good work."

Pel was thinking. "D'you think so? What was that word he used—Galahad? What's it mean?"

Skin said, "Search me. Some police slang, I guess." He added, in another tone, "Thanks, Pel. You've helped a lot."

Pel said, "I was thinking of Dad Maroni."

Rogers said, "Oh, sure, sure." He did not speak again until the car pulled up outside Sapolio's.

Pel was stepping out. He could see Ricketty standing a few doors away busy, apparently, looking at nothing in particular.

"Anything to say to me?" Rogers asked.

"No."

"Still think I'm a ——"

Pel said without looking at him, "We all have our code." He tapped the shop window with his cane, and got to work.

Ricketty limped up as Rogers drove off. With no more than a glance at him Pel said, "On the *inside* see Sapolio . . ." motioning with his cane. Ricketty took the hint. He went through the shop and waited on the back steps.

By and by, Pel joined him. "Well?" he asked.

"No," Ricketty said. "I gotta good look. This bird ain't the one I saw. He's tall like him, but no more. I'm sorry, Pel."

"Sorry?" Pel's eyes lit. But he checked his smile. "You're sure? It's important."

"Sure I'm sure. He don't look the same, and he don't walk the same."

The grin came back to Pel's face. He put his hand out and squeezed Ricketty's shoulder. "Thanks," he said. "You've been a real pal."

He paused with his hand on the door. "How's the bank?"

Ricketty grinned back shamelessly. "I've exceeded me overdraft."

Pel produced a ten-shilling note.

"Thanks," Ricketty said, taking it. "I need it. Somehow, every time I see that bloke starvin' I feel hungry."

Paul Maroni stared at the posters outside Sapolio's tomb. Pel's offsider, Cecil, was spruiking in desultory fashion. Most of his imagination was in his feet and, every now and again, he executed a few light-hearted steps, sadly out of keeping with the show he was announcing. Maroni hesitated a moment, but was already walking away when Pel appeared and hurried after him.

"Mr Maroni," he said, "I wanted to see you." He held the circus man's hand. "I won't say anything. There's nothing I can say, is there?"

Maroni's lips tightened. He shook his head.

"But I have to talk to you," Pel said. He spoke briefly to the lad on the door, then took Maroni's arm. "Let's have some coffee—quietly." He steered the old man to a quiet table in a quiet room.

Maroni's hands were clasped and twitching as he leaned forward and looked across the marble table. "Who did it, Pel?" he asked, brokenly. "Who'd do that to my girl?"

"I don't know, Mr Maroni, but we'll find him."

The old man looked down at his gnarled hands. "I don't know. I don't know as it would do any

good. To her, I mean." He paused, and then went on softly, "I never told anyone else. I'm not telling those police fellers. But she cleared out—left the show—with some city feller."

The waitress brought coffee. When she had gone Maroni said, "First, when she cleared out, I thought it was over Salvi. She was stuck on him, you know. I didn't like it."

Pel said, "They get that way about him."

"That's what I told Rena," the circus man said. "Haven't I seen 'em! What's he got, that feller?"

"Ask *them*."

Maroni gazed with unblinking eyes. "When I was young," he said, "they used to hang about—I wasn't a bad-lookin' kid—but nothing like they chase Salvi."

"He's not so wonderful to look at," Pel said. "Maybe the dames don't know the answer themselves."

Maroni spoke as if he had not heard. "When I told her to quit foolin' with him, we had some words. But just words. I thought she'd got over it. I told her I'd have none of him as a son-in-law." He looked helplessly across the table. "I shouldn't've said that Pel. Ordering her round. Couldn't never stand anyone ordering *me* around. Married the girl I wanted to and be damned to all of them."

He put several lumps of sugar in his coffee, and began stirring mechanically, talking. "That weren't the worst of it. The next night I see Salvi go into Estelle's dressing-tent. She'd fallen for

him, too, poor little devil! I don't like that sort of thing about the lot, but I didn't interfere. I made a bad break, Pel. I think I'll cure Rena once for all. I go and get her and take her along to Estelle's tent. We stand outside and we can see their shadows on the canvas—him and her.

"Suddenly he puts out his hands and takes her in his arms and kisses her. It was a shadow show. So plain. Rena lets out a little cry as if someone had stabbed her, and turns and runs away back to her own tent. I creep up and I can hear her sobbing and sobbing, and I spoke to her and she said, 'Go away! Go away!'"

He looked down at the spoon which was still in his coffee cup. He had forgotten it. He put it in the saucer, and looked at Pel with moist eyes. "They were the last words I heard her say. The next morning she had gone."

He drank a mouthful of coffee. "I figure," he said, "that she was so het up about Salvi and Estelle that she cleared out with this other guy."

Pel finished his coffee. "Listen, Mr Maroni," he said. "Whatever they say, whatever you hear, don't get it into your head that Rena was a wrong un—even for a moment. She was a Maroni. I saw her the day before she died. She was going back to the show."

A tiny gleam came into Maroni's eyes. "You're not just telling me, Pel?"

"No," Pel said. "I talked to her a lot. She was going back to the show. She was getting her

hands fit. She was crazy to get back, but was scared of you."

"Skeered of me?" The old man was incredulous.

Pel said, "She'd left you flat. She thought she'd let the show down. She knew what the show meant to you."

Maroni nodded. "I know how she'd feel."

"But she was going back," Pel said firmly. "She even had a present for you. An old scrap book a friend of mine collected and gave her. It's full of old circus pictures. You on the Arab, and Rena as a tiny tot in her first act on the Shetland—and your wife. Funny, isn't it, how other people collect the things that mean so much to us?"

"Rena said, 'Dad'll be tickled pink. He'll love this. Dear old dad!' They were her very words."

Maroni's lips moved, but no words came.

"So, you see," Pel went on, "the last words she said to you were not, 'Go away!' "

"'Dear old dad!' " The words came slowly. The circus man put out his hand and rested it on Pel's. "She always liked you, Pel," he said.

"She liked me," Pel said, "because I liked you."

Pel returned to his spruiking. It was interesting to see how business improved when he was in front. Invariably he found something fresh to say, but he was too good a showman to spruik all the time. The "ballyhoo" was part of the show, but there were more ways of getting them in than by talking to them.

Thus, when Dan Carey came along and asked, "How's it going?" Pel took him by the arm, gently squeezed it and, knowing very well that several were listening, said earnestly, "We're expecting trouble, Dan. It's his wife. She doesn't like it. He's pretty hungry by now, and to-morrow he'll be worse, and pretty cranky. If she comes down she'll think he's dying. Either he'll break his way out or she'll break her way in. Be a sport. Try and keep her away."

Carey loyally responded. "I'll do my best, but you know what she is when she's on the rampage. I'll invite her out to the showgrounds."

"What you got there this year?" Pel asked, equally loyal.

"Wang, the Chinese giant—and is he big!"

"Eat much?"

"I'll say!" Carey said, passing into the shop. He looked back over his shoulder. "Three loaves of bread and two pounds of steak for breakfast. Can you beat it?"

Pel struck the window sharply with his cane. "On the inside see Sapolio, the starving man, the only human being in the world who can live without food . . ."

Later, inside, Carey said quietly, "Linley's been out to the showgrounds—going over us with a small tooth-comb."

"Did he find anything?"

"I don't think so. But he's curious about Wang. The big boy won't talk. I don't think he knows the quarter of what's said to him."

"Linley may be kidding about the giant."

"I thought of that. But Wang *was* out of the room that night, once at least. I guess where he went, but I don't know. Look how he came to the party. Made up his mind all of a sudden. And Linley's found out that, when the taxi brought him, he went up on his own and came back again a few minutes later. About five, the taxi chap says."

"Why?"

"He doesn't know. He was doing something to his car when the big boy turned up again and pointed upstairs. The taxi chap thought he wanted him to show him the way. That's why he brought him up. I don't think there's anything in it. But Linley doesn't know Wang's kind. We know they're all whims. They ain't really human, Pel."

He lowered his voice. "He might have been on his way up and seen the girl, and a bug got him. The girl would be scared stiff if something like that walked in unexpected. He'd get excited, maybe, and—Gee, I hate to think of it. It'd be so quick—and easy."

"You got too much imagination," Pel commented. "Wang wouldn't hurt anything."

"He wouldn't mean to, but you don't know what's in the minds of these birds. I been among 'em all my life, and I never found out yet. And giants is the worst. Wang might've just thought she was pretty and wanted to touch her. He don't know how strong he is. Look how he outed Rorke—and Salvi—with his palm. Just a push."

"I know. I know," Pel said. "But I can't see it." He thought a moment. "Salvi working on his own this year?"

"No, he's with me," Carey said. "He and Joel Webster were working percentage, but Joel's had some family trouble and had to go south. I took over for him. I'm glad to get Salvi. I hate the feller—I think—but he's a showman. And he sure can pull the women."

"Linley talk to him?"

"Plenty. He don't know nothing, and he keeps on saying it. But, say, there was one thing, Pel. I don't think Linley asked him. I never thought of it myself till now. But I got a hazy idea someone rang him up at Sap's party."

"I didn't notice," Pel said, but his eyes narrowed. "Look, Dan, keep it under your hat a bit, will you? I've got a hunch."

"About Salvi—and the telephone? I don't think it's anything. Some dame tailing him up, I guess."

"Maybe," Pel agreed. "I'll pop out to the showground to-morrow morning, and take a look at things."

"You'll get Salvi in the morning," Carey told him. "The carrier's bringing his gear at ten. Salvi'll be there. He's fussy about it."

Before lunch Pel walked round to the Jockey Club, and saw Rogers. "What's got to be done has got to be done in private, Skin," he said.

The bookmaker looked at him inquiringly. Without a word he led the way to the room he used

as office, and carefully shut the door. "What is it?" he asked.

Pel took off his hat, and placed it carefully on the desk. He pulled out a chair, and set it in the middle of the room. He turned his back on Rogers, lifted his coat tails, and leaned over the chair.

"Kick me hard, Skin," he said. "I deserve it."

Rogers grinned. With the palm of his hand he gave the other a resounding thwack. "Feel better?"

"It helps." Pel straightened.

"Now, spill it."

Pelham told him about Ricketty and what he had seen on the Billiga siding, and how he had planted Ricketty outside the club that morning to see whether he could recognize Rogers as the man he saw take Rena Maroni away.

Rogers said, "Ricketty? Well, I'm blowed. After all these years! How's he fixed?"

"He's got a hat and boots, and a sort of coat and trousers. I'll find him something."

"Here's my whack for old time's sake," Rogers said, producing a five-pound note. "He earned it this morning."

"I'll give him a bit at a time. I'd like him to stay put a bit. He's a loyal scout to those he knows. Took quite a liking to your car. Says a Belmont's the kind he'd buy."

"Does he, now?"

"I guess the only car he's ever ridden in is the black one with an escort on the back step."

Rogers said, "You eat about 6.30, don't you?"

And when Pel nodded he went on, "Make it 5.30. Have Ricketty there. I'll pick you up."

He was there in the Belmont right to the moment. At his bidding, Pel climbed in the back of the car. In a few moments the lanky Cecil escorted Ricketty to the kerb.

"Get in," Rogers said.

"What's this?" Ricketty inquired, hesitating. "Police?"

"Police nothing, you little blighter," Rogers grinned and, reaching out, grabbed the other by the arm and yanked him into the car. "Hold on to him, Pel," he added, as he started the car.

It was, for Ricketty at least, a miraculous reunion. The big car moved swiftly until, leaving the city, it sped through the suburbs and over gentle hills and, at the end of an avenue of trees, stopped before a large building with ample grounds.

"Well, gentlemen," Rogers said, "there she is. A bit changed. She's bigger and fatter. But that's her, all right."

He got out. The others followed.

"The old home," Ricketty said, quietly.

They stood in a line, Skin Rogers towering over the other two. He lifted his hand, and they followed suit. "Ready," Skin said. "Right!"

Together they roared the old school cry, "Hoo-hoo-hootah. Hootah-hootah-hay. Yow-ee."

The yell brought a crowd of boys rushing to the high railings. Rogers dragged a parcel from the car and opened it, and began throwing cakes of

chocolate and bags of sweets over the fence. Pel helped. Ricketty pocketed a few cakes of chocolates against emergency, and went to work with a will.

"Divide 'em up," Skin cried. He looked through the railings, and spoke to one of the bigger lads. He was a good-looking boy, watching the others scrambling for the packets. "Say," Skin said, "don't you want any?"

"Oh, they'll give me some."

Rogers let his gaze rest for a moment on the boy's face. "*I bet they will*," he said. "And I bet you see the little kids get a fair deal."

"I will, mister."

Rogers put his hand through the railings. "Shake, pal," he said.

As the trio climbed back into the car, Ricketty with battered hat and torn pants, Pelham slick in his bowler and tailed coat, Rogers neatly and expensively dressed, two men passed.

One said, "What's the idea, I wonder?"

The other said, "It's a publicity stunt."

That evening Marie brought her sewing and sat alongside her Henri, consoling him at intervals with a smile or a portentous wink, and, at such times as there were no curious listeners, exchanging a word or two.

"How you feel, poppa?"

"Zee 'ead 'e aches—jus' like always. You 'ave nice dejeuner, Marie?"

She put her sewing into her lap. "Consomme. Zee rosbif, an'—oui, zee creme Francois Mattiste!" She kissed her fingers. "Ah, c'est bon!"

Sapolio smiled back. "Postcards—she is good," he reported. "*La Vie Henri Sapolio* not so 'ot. She will grow. On Saturday, momma, I go cranky."

"I know," she said. "Pel tell me. Henri, don' you be too cranky, like Madrid. Don' you smash no glass. Zee glass she cos' money." She chuckled, and her husband laughed back at her through the pane.

Then, simultaneously, both countenances dropped, and Sapolio's assumed his professional melancholy, as visitors entered. Marie began sewing with hysterical intensity, every now and then wiping away an imaginary tear. It was a picture to arouse curiosity and, maybe, sympathy.

Pel had a word with the Frenchwoman before she left. "We're in for a good season, Marie. We'll have a real party when Henri comes out."

"I count ev'ry day. When 'e come out zee chou'fleur she will be in bloom. Poppa 'e like zee chou'fleur. I make sauerkraut Alsacienne, too. Your little boy, 'e like my gateaux?"

"It was a fight to the death between us for the last one."

She didn't understand, but knew it was a compliment. "I make the gateaux very good," she said.

Sapolio, watching them from the other side of the glass, smiled understandingly. He poured himself some soda water and lifted his glass.

Pel walked down the avenue of sideshows. The carnival was not to open for a few days, but, already, many tents were erected and ready for occupation. Most had big, garish signs affixed.

Estelle's was a pit show next to Wang's, from which hung a gigantic banner representing a panic-stricken mob of pig-tailed Chinese fleeing in consternation from a tremendous figure whose seven-league boots were crushing one or two of the more tardy celestials. Spurts of red paint, representing the blood of unfortunates, added a pleasant note of colour to a rather gruesome ensemble, but gave verisimilitude to the wording:

WANG

The Terror of Peking

Bella, the tattooed lady, was talking earnestly to Salvi outside the entrance to his tent when Pel strode up. Neither was particularly pleased at the interruption, and Pel knew it.

"Hope I'm not intruding," he said.

"No," Bella said, quickly. "I was just going. Our outfit's just round the corner. I'll be seein' you." She set off, moving gracefully on shapely, black-stockinged legs.

"Some looker, Bella," Pel commented.

"She's all right," Salvi agreed, but without enthusiasm.

"I wanted to have a yarn with you, Salvi."

The sword-walker glanced up suspiciously. "About what?"

"About Rena Maroni," Pel said steadily. He kept his eyes on the other's face.

Salvi turned away impatiently. "I'm fed up talking about her," he said.

Pel said, "For your own sake, you've got to talk. I'm not the police."

Salvi looked at him rudely. "How do I know?" He added swiftly, "Not that it matters."

Pel said, "If you don't talk to me, I'll have to tell what I know."

"Know about what?" He was truculent.

"Various things. Your telephone call on the night of the murder, for instance. You haven't told anyone about that, have you?"

Salvi was staring at his patent-leather shoes. He did not look up. He said, "Let's get inside."

He led the way to the entrance of the tent, walking softly—like a cat, Pel thought—but with swift steps. When they were inside he let down the flap. There was a small platform at the far end, and on this a ladder of swords had been erected. The sabres, laid crosswise, edges up, brightly polished, made a brave show.

Salvi said, "Squat down," and seated himself on the edge of the platform.

Pel sat beside him. He said, "You're asking yourself what this has got to do with me. Well,

it's got a lot to do with me. I'm suspect. I was with Rena Maroni quite a bit lately."

"I know," Salvi said. "She told me."

Pel was genuinely surprised. "She told you. When?"

"The afternoon of the day she was killed." His eyes lifted, and, for the first time, he looked directly at Pel. "If she hadn't told me I wouldn't be talking to you now. I know you were helping her out of a jam—trying to fix things so she could go back to the old man." He leaned back, and ran his finger along the carved handle of the lowest sabre in the ladder behind him. "I guess Linley was right," he went on. "We're all in this. Any one of us mighta done it. But we didn't. I didn't, anyhow. I don't think any of the mob did, but we can't prove it."

"We can try."

"Be little Sherlock Holmeses." He laughed.

Pel said, softly, "Rena liked you."

Salvi made an impatient gesture. "She thought she did."

"Did you like her?"

Salvi shrugged. "As much as I like any of 'em," he said. He paused, then added in a different tone, as if the thought had just struck him, "I don't like any of 'em very much."

"Not even—Estelle?"

Salvi sprang to his feet. "Oh, for Pete's sake!" he cried. "Why drag her in? Someone from Maroni's show's been talking. Well, if you want to know, I kissed her and played round a bit

with her. I don't know why. I was sorry for her, I guess. But listen, Pelham, don't get me wrong. She's on the level, and she's a wonderful woman. Why shouldn't she have a bit of fun?"

"I know. I know," Pel said, soothingly. "She's a great kid. I only wanted to get things straight."

Salvi calmed and sat down again, but his eyes were still smouldering.

Pel said, "Who telephoned you at the party?"

Salvi thought a moment. "Oh, that," he said, his tone elaborately casual. "That weren't nothing—nothing to do with the other business."

"When she told you about me, was that the last time you saw her before the police came?"

Salvi stared at his toes. He did not answer, and Pel went on,

"Someone found the key of her apartment. There will be a finger- and thumb-print on it. I thought you'd better know."

The flap at the entrance was pulled back suddenly, and Dan Carey entered, followed by Rorke. "Mr Rorke wants to see you, Salvi," he said. "Oh, hello, Pel."

Rorke looked sour. "Why must *you* always be about?" he asked, as Pel rose. "You can get out of here. I've got business with this bird." He walked over to the small platform, and looked over Salvi's shoulder at the ladder of swords. "This the fake ladder?" he asked. "Very pretty. *Very* pretty." He put out his finger and touched the edge of one of the sabres, withdrawing quickly with

an oath, and putting his finger in his mouth as blood came from the cut.

Carey grinned happily. "Little boys shouldn't touch," Pel said.

Rorke turned savagely on Salvi. "Get up, Don Juan," he said.

Salvi rose effortlessly to his feet. "What do you want?" he asked. "I've told Linley all I know."

"Is that so?" Rorke said. "You told him, I suppose, that you were in love with Renie Maroni?"

There was a perceptible pause before Salvi answered. "In love with *who*?"

"Renie Maroni," Rorke said. "You heard." He went on, "Get your hat. Linley wants to talk to you again."

"You surely don't think—" Carey began.

"I think one of two things, Carey," Rorke snapped. "Either this bird—" he indicated Pel—"killed the girl with his lily-white hands, or this Mormon—" he gestured with his cut finger at Salvi—"found her in her apartment with another man and choked the life out of her."

"It isn't true," Salvi shouted.

Rorke laughed nastily. "Well," he said, "some other fellow's got the key of her flat, and I hear it wasn't little Pelham here. I wouldn't be surprised if it weren't in your pocket right now—unless you've hidden it. The boys are taking a peek round your room now."

Salvi was very white. "I don't know what you mean," he cried. "I haven't any key. Only my

own." He thrust his hand in his pocket, and pulled out a miscellaneous collection of coins and a couple of keys.

"I'll take those," Rorke said, and held out his open palm. Salvi gave him the keys, and he spilled them into the side pocket of his coat. "Before we go," he said, "I'll take a peek round this palace of wonders." He turned on Pel again. "Didn't I tell you to go?" he asked.

"Oh, I'm on my way," Pel said, calmly. "I'd hate to be a nuisance." He put his hand on Carey's arm and squeezed it gently. "Sorry, Dan," he said, "I won't be able to see you this afternoon after all. I'm treating the missus and the kid to a spot of vaudeville. It's the boy's birthday."

"O.K., Pel," Carey said. "Keep in touch."

"Thanks, Dan. See you in church." Pel moved to the tent entrance and lifted the flap. He held the canvas back with one hand and looked at Rorke. Then, with great gravity, he raised his hat. The next moment he had gone.

Rorke was mad. "Some day," he said, "I'll choke that bird." He turned on Carey. "Nice sort of company you keep."

"I like it," Carey said, simply.

"Maybe one of 'em will invite you to his hanging," Rorke said. "Because one or other of 'em did it. Either this bird—" he nodded at Salvi—"or your precious giant."

Carey smiled amiably. "What about Mr Micklewitz, the midget?"

Rorke smiled, but it was not pleasant. "Or the armless wonder." He laughed coarsely. "That's it!" he said, facetiously. "She crept down the stairs in her stockinged feet, and strangled the dame with her bare toes."

A tinge of pink spread slowly over Carey's face. His fists clenched. He walked up to the plain-clothes man. "Look here, Rorke," he said. "Remember this. A man can stand for so much and no more. Get me?" He abruptly left the tent.

Rorke raised his eyebrows. "Why, whatever have I said?" He looked at Salvi shrewdly. "Kinda touched him on the raw." He laughed. "After what I learned at Maroni's Circus I thought the armless piece belonged to someone else. Can you beat it?"

He began to look round the tent, prying into corners, examining the handles of the sabres. There were not many places there where a key might be hidden. At last he turned irritably to Salvi. "Come on," he said. "Get your hat."

"I don't wear one."

"You wouldn't," Rorke said, as if that were the last straw.

CHAPTER NINE

AFTER leaving the showgrounds Pel took a tram to the city, and spent a profitable two hours spruiking in front of the "tomb." It was a quiet performance. He would have told you it had "class." He used several words that he was sure his listeners didn't understand, because he didn't understand them himself.

There would be plenty of time for hysterical harangue when the stunting began. No man knew better than he the value of contrasts. He expected business to be quiet for a while, but it was astonishing how the sixpences mounted. Few people were ever in the shop at the one time, but the twenty-four hours' takings grew to a very respectable figure. And of course there were the post-card sales, which were profitable. Pel was well satisfied. He glanced at the takings till noon, and things looked good enough. He'd take home a bottle of beer with the tickets for the vaudeville show.

He accompanied his wife and child to the theatre. He gave up the three tickets and went inside. The show was not due to start for some fifteen minutes. In five minutes he got up and went to the door and, collecting a pass-out check, strolled into the crowded vestibule.

Here he met his wife's sister and gave her the pass-out, with which she passed in after he had told her the number of the row in which his wife

was sitting. He hurried to the corner of the block and, taking a taxi, gave the driver the address of his home.

A block away from his front door he dismissed the car, and walked briskly. He went through his house to the back door and, taking out the kitchen key, locked the door from the outside and put the key under the mat. He disturbed the mat deliberately, leaving it slightly askew as if it had been lifted and put down in a hurry. He walked round the side of the house and again let himself in, with his latch-key.

Shutting the front door he went into the bedroom, and was busy a few moments. Then he went into the hall, and opened the door of a tall closet from which various overcoats were hanging from hooks in the ceiling. Next he found a book and, sitting on a chair near the closet door, began to read.

It was less than half an hour later when he heard the sound for which he had been waiting.

Very quietly he slipped the book into his pocket, stepped inside the closet, and pulled the door almost to. He waited, listening. Someone rang the front door bell. He made no move. The ring was repeated. A few minutes later he heard light footsteps in the laneway at the side of the house, then a tapping on the back door.

Someone tried the door and, a moment later, he heard the sound of a key being inserted in the lock. He drew farther into his hiding place. The kitchen door opened, and very softly closed again. Stealthy

footsteps moved through the kitchen and into the hall, and ceased. Pel sensed that the intruder was listening.

At length the steps passed the door of the closet, and moved into his bedroom.

He waited patiently. Now and again he heard slight, stealthy movements as of some small objects being moved and replaced. Drawers opened softly and closed again. No more than five minutes had elapsed before his visitor uttered a little exclamation. A drawer closed, footsteps hurried past him, the kitchen door opened and closed, and a key turned in the lock. He heard a tinkle as it was placed under the mat.

Pel emerged from his hiding place and went swiftly to the bedroom. He knelt down so that he could peer beneath the drawn blind and watch the front gate. He heard steps coming up the laneway and, soon, a figure came into view. Pel whistled under his breath. He got up and sat down on the side of the bed.

"Well," he told himself. "Ain't I just one heck of a detective?"

He crossed to the dressing table, opened a drawer and rummaged a while. He went back to the bed and lit a cigarette. "Now," he said, "where do we go from here?" He had a picture in his mind of Bella, the tattooed girl, looking furtively round as she closed the front gate.

Linley came along that evening, and waved a greeting to Sapolio. As he left he had a word with

Pel at the door. "I had a yarn with Salvi again," he said. "Tell me, Pelham, what was between that chap and Rena Maroni?"

Pel said, "I don't believe Salvi can love anyone but himself. I think he's sick of women."

"Had a surfeit?"

Pel didn't know the word. "He's had a stomachful," he amended.

"I never had more than two women chase me in my life," Linley said.

Pel smiled. "You're lucky," he said. "I never had more'n one. I didn't run very hard."

Linley said later, "Rena Maroni might've been a nuisance to him."

Pel gave it a moment's thought. "No," he said. "She's not that sort. Too proud. If he didn't want her, she'd never cling. She'd eat her heart out, but she wouldn't let him know."

"There's a thought there," Linley said.

"Mind telling me what Rorke found out at the circus?"

"No," Linley said, readily. "You'd find out yourself, anyway. He says it was the general impression that Rena was head over heels in love with Salvi. Rorke thinks the sword-walker was in love with her, too, or pretended to be. The circus would be Rena's when the old man died. If she married him, one day he'd be the director or whatever you call it."

Pel's lip curled. "It's another of Rorke's nasty thoughts."

"My own idea of Salvi," Linley said, "is that he loves 'em and leaves 'em."

"They don't stay on his mind," Pel said.

"Maybe someone different'll turn up one of these days and put him in the shafts."

Someone different! Pel suddenly remembered Bella showing the stencilled snake curled about the calves of her legs, and Salvi's look of interest. He recollected the hurried way she had pulled her skirts down. He thought of her standing with Salvi in front of his tent that morning, and, again, he saw her stealing away from his house.

A man paused outside the shop. He wore an obviously new suit a little too large for him, the trousers almost dangerously creased. The double-breasted coat might have been hanging on a tailor's dummy, it was so stiffly straight. An almost white felt hat, a little too small, perched on his head. He was freshly shaved, and exuded an odour of bay rum.

Pel glanced at him, grinned in friendly fashion, and struck the window pane with his cane. "Sapolio is on the inside," he cried. "All the best dressed men in town come to see this marvel of the age. Get your ticket at the window, sir."

The man stepped up to the box. He said to Delphine in an undertone, "Know me?"

She surveyed the stiff collar, the gaudy tie, the grinning face.

"I'm Ricketty."

"Good Lord! I thought you was the Duke of Lancaster."

Ricketty grinned.

"How come?" Delphine asked. "Win a lottery, or going to a fancy-dress ball?"

"Met an old school pal. He staked me. Oh boy, what a pal! Listen, lady, the boss wants I should buy a ticket—but you know me. Give me a ticket to make a play, and I'll give it to you back later. Compree?"

"Compree," Delphine said, and went on loudly, "There's your change, sir. Step inside the tomb."

Equally loudly Ricketty said, "Thank you, my pet," and entered the shop, his hand holding the roll-ticket extended for all the world to see he had paid to see Sapolio starve.

Linley watched him go. "Who's the tailor's dummy?" he asked.

"Looks to me as if his own mother wouldn't know him," Pel said.

"Face seems familiar."

Pel said, "Hardly in your class. Small fry. More in Rorke's line."

Linley smiled. "You don't like Rorke?"

Pel grinned back good-naturedly. "I don't like the way he does his hair," he said. "I don't like the cigars he smokes."

"Doesn't smoke cigars," Linley said. "At least I haven't seen him."

Pel was silent a little time before he answered, "Then I won't send him any."

When Linley had gone, Pel went through the

shop and spoke to Ricketty, who had carefully spread a handkerchief and was sitting on the steps.

"My, my!" Pel said, flicking Ricketty's new tie with his finger so that it fell in all its magnificence over his waistcoat. "You have done yourself well."

"Skin says, 'Make yourself look like a gentleman'," Ricketty said. "And what Skin says goes."

"You've done a good job."

Ricketty preened himself. He put his tie straight, and set his hat at a new and jauntier angle. "I suppose it's born in you," he said.

Pel reached over and, without comment, took the price ticket from the outside of the other man's hat band, and threw it away. He said, "We're losing our night watchman soon. He's got a day job. I thought I'd give you a chance here."

"You mean it, Pel?"

"There's a string to it. You'd have to go as teetotal as Sapolio."

"I could do it, Pel. If you and Skin arsts me, I can do it." He looked down at his new suit. "Word of a gentleman."

"I believe you. Skin says you'll be O.K. It's a responsible job, you know. It's an important job."

"I'm an important man," Ricketty said. He looked very seriously at his benefactor. "You know somethin', Pel? It's a great thing havin' a pair of trousers without a hole in 'em. It does somethin' to a feller. Kinda gives him dignity."

Pel patted him on the shoulder. "Atta boy."

It was Friday night, and the street was crowded with late shoppers and idlers. There was every prospect of good business, but Pel did not use his lungs unduly.

As a matter of fact he told his story very quietly and, as each customer walked to the ticket box, he said in an undertone, loud enough to be heard by those round about, "Don't do anything to upset him. He's very irritable to-day. Thank you. I knew you'd understand."

And strangely enough, they did. Those thus adjured and those who overheard and presently came, curiously, on their heels, moved almost apologetically round the glass tomb from which Sapolio glared at them, his big eyes as vindictive as any caged orang-outang's.

A man, obeying the notice to the effect that anyone desiring an autographed postcard should pass sixpence through the slot provided, pushed his coin in and waited. Sapolio turned his back on him. The man tapped on the glass and pointed to the coin.

Sapolio turned with a scowl that showed all his white teeth, and a snarl that made all those watching hastily retreat a step or two. He seized the sixpence and savagely thrust a postcard through the slot.

The buyer said, "He's not too polite."

A man alongside said, "You wouldn't be either if you'd been four days without food."

The postcard buyer said, "Well, it's his funeral—or p'raps it will be."

He left the tomb well pleased with himself, but first he held the postcard against the wall of the shop and wrote the word *funeral* upon it, so that he could remember what he had said and tell his friends. He did quite an appreciable bit of quiet advertising for Pel and Sapolio.

A man in an elaborately new suit and a white felt hat a little too small for him said, "Well, gents, I've come in to see this poor creature every day since he started fastin', and, personally, I think the man's mad. You've only got to look at him. Take a squint at those eyes. Broodin'."

Furtively his audience watched Sapolio seat himself at his desk and strop a razor.

"Now," said the man in the white hat, "*that* had ought to be took away from him."

Suddenly Sapolio threw down the razor and commenced walking up and down his prison, his hands opening and closing as if trying their strength. The wastepaper basket was in his way, and he gave it a mighty kick that sent it flying. It struck the glass pane.

"Look out!" said the man in the white hat, and everybody stepped back again.

Sapolio, however, took no notice of them, but went on walking up and down.

"Like a caged lion," a man said, and walked out.

The man in the white hat followed him. He addressed Pel loudly. "In my opinion," he said, so that all might hear, "that man in there will smash his way through the glass before many hours pass. You mark my words."

The man who had come out with him looked round and said in an aggrieved tone, "Like a caged lion."

With a look of concern Pel hurried inside the shop. Quite a number paid sixpence to Delphine and followed him.

"After that," said the man in the felt hat, "I need a drink. Care to join me?"

"Too right." The other was not loath. Together they went to a nearby bar.

The postcard buyer was there. He turned from the barmaid. "These gentlemen will tell you," he said.

"Like a caged lion," said the chap who had come in with Ricketty.

Ricketty thought, "My Lord, this is easy. What a feller for startin' things." He let the postcard buyer do the talking.

He was telling the barmaid, "I tell you the man's mad. Well, it's his own funeral."

The other man said, "After you left he played up a treat. Started smashing the blinking joint." He looked at the barmaid. "No place for a woman," he said. "Dangerous."

The barmaid and her girl friend went down to see Sapolio after closing time. They had a shilling's worth each—sixpence to go in, and sixpence for an autographed photo. They were nice girls, and seemed to have a peculiarly soothing effect on the starving man. Before he gave them the photos he kissed the pictures.

As they went out Pel said, "Thank you very much for coming. A woman's influence is wonderful. This afternoon he was like a raving lion."

The girls placed Sapolio's picture in a prominent place right next the most popular whisky. It was astonishing the number of customers they showed them to. For a day at least one of them felt like Florence Nightingale.

Sapolio retired at about ten o'clock, but, even then, a steady trickle of people went through the shop doors and passed on tiptoe round the glass house talking in whispers.

Pel took a tram and went to Salvi's apartment house. He walked right in, and spoke to the proprietress. She was very fat and had blonde ringlets, but Pel could remember her when she weighed eight stone and was a brunette in the front row of the ballet.

"What's Salvi's number, Minnie?"

She told him, "Seventeen. But you can't go up, Pel. He's got a visitor." She winked.

"That's all right, Minnie. I'm his pal. It's only a message." He smiled disarmingly.

"Well," she said, doubtfully. "If it was anyone but you I'd say 'Over my dead body,' but—"

He was past her and mounting the stairs. At 17 he tapped discreetly on the door. In a moment or two, it was opened a few inches and Salvi looked out. He said, "Who is it?"

Pel put his foot in the opening and, with a sudden push and a wriggle, was inside.

"What's the big idea?" Salvi was angry. He was coatless and barefooted. Behind him Bella, the tattooed girl, was sitting on the bed.

Pel said, "Hello, Bella."

She did not reply. Her lips set, and the mischievousness in her eyes died. She glanced quickly towards the door, which Pel was closing.

"What the—" Salvi began, when Pel interrupted.

"Hold your horses, Salvi. I'm not sticky-beaking. Let's be comfortable." He pulled up a chair and sat down.

Salvi leaned on the foot rail of the bed, scowling. He took out his cigarette case and offered it to Bella.

She took one and put it in her mouth. "Mr Pelham is wondering what I'm doing here," she said. Her lip curled. "What are you in now? The vice squad?"

"Now, now, Bella," Pel said. "Don't be nasty. I'm wondering. Of course I'm wondering, but that's only because I don't know much about you. I had it in my head you was running with the professor."

She uttered an exclamation of impatience. "The professor!" She laughed scornfully. "I'm no more to him than a drawing board." She glanced covertly at Salvi, but he was watching Pel.

"All right, all right," Pel said, soothingly, "if that's how it is. It's all right by me. And it's none of my affair."

"Too right it isn't," Salvi said. "What's the idea of busting in here?"

Pel smoked for a moment, then he looked up and said quietly, "Salvi, you're in a jam."

"*I'm* in a jam?"

"Yes," Pel said. "A nasty jam. I wouldn't be surprised if you weren't arrested for murder."

Bella cried, "No! Don't believe him, Salvi."

The sword-walker was very pale. He threw away his cigarette, and his long fingers moved restlessly through his curly hair. "Why are they picking on me?" he said at length.

Pel spoke deliberately. "Because, for one thing, you're the sort of fellow you are. Temperamental. The sort that might do anything on the spur of the moment—in a temper, I mean. They think you were in love with Rena Maroni and you went to her flat, and either because you were disappointed or jealous, in a fit of rage, you killed her."

"You're mad," Salvi said.

"No," Pel said. "They're mad. They think it. Not me."

"You mean the police?" Bella asked.

Pel nodded.

"It's only a guess, anyway," Salvi said. "They've nothing to go on."

"But, don't you see? Things fit." Pel stubbed out his cigarette. "First, you and Rena were friends—great friends. Then Rena runs away with a man."

"Rena? I never knew."

"Maybe not, but you can't prove it. You lost track of her, but at last you found her."

"It was accident," Salvi said. "Pure accident. Why, her name wasn't even on the door of her apartment. Some other name was there."

"It was her real name."

"What do you mean, her real name?" Bella asked.

"Dora May. Her dad's name is May. Maroni's just circus."

"I didn't know," Salvi said.

"But you can't prove it," Pel said again. "Anyway, what made you go to the apartment in the first place?"

Bella was listening attentively. Salvi turned away. He walked to the dressing table and picked up a brush. Slowly and mechanically, without knowing what he was doing, he began to brush his hair. "I can't tell you," he said.

"Meaning you won't."

Salvi swung round. He still held the hairbrush. "Get this straight, Pelham. *I* didn't kill her."

"All right," Pel said, softly. "You didn't kill her. But you went to her apartment on the night of the party, and you came away with the key."

While Salvi stared, speechless, Pel pulled out a latch-key, demonstrating.

"Ever notice a latch-key? See how you have to handle it. It's pretty well impossible not to leave a good impression of your thumb and finger."

The brush dropped from Salvi's hand. He sat

down on the bed beside Bella, his head in his hands.

"The trouble is, Salvi," Pel went on, "that the key was found. When it is dusted for prints they'll find yours, won't they?"

Salvi's head swayed from side to side. "But I didn't do it!" he cried. He looked up eagerly. "Listen, Pel, I believe you're on the level. I'll tell you."

Bella jumped up and thrust herself between the two men. "Don't you tell him, Salvi," she cried. "Tell him nothing. The dirty little rat. The pimp! He found the key himself, and he'd turn you over for some miserable reward. But he can't do it. He can't do a thing, see? Listen, Salvi," she sat down beside him on the bed, and put her arm about his shoulders. "Don't you say a word. Whatever it is, don't you say a word."

The sword-walker looked at her, puzzled.

For a moment she gazed into his eyes, then she flung herself into his arms and began to sob. "Go away," she cried, motioning to Pel with one hand behind her back. "Leave him alone. You can't do anything. You're bluffing. You know you're bluffing. He's trying to fool you, Salvi. There isn't any key. Nobody's got any key."

Pel sat motionless, looking down at his toes, smiling as the girl's sobs continued. When he looked up Salvi was caressing Bella's hair and, as she looked into his eyes, he kissed her. Pel's mouth slightly opened. His tongue played with the inside of his cheek.

He said, "All right, Bella. Now that's off your beautiful chest, I can tell you to keep your key. I don't want it. Do what you like with it."

Salvi gently put the girl from him and stood up. "What is this?" he asked.

Pel waved to Bella. "Meet Mrs Galahad," he said, learnedly.

"Mrs who?" Salvi asked.

"Mrs nothing," Bella said. "He's dippy."

"We're all dippy sometime or other, Bella," Pel said easily. "You were dippy when you broke into my house this afternoon."

She looked at him savagely for a moment, then she turned to Salvi. "I only wanted to help," she said. "I was outside your tent when he was talking to you and when Rorke came in. I heard what he said about the key, and I heard him chat to Carey about going to a matinee. I'm not so dumb. I guessed he had the key, and—and I went and got it for you."

Suddenly she turned on Pel, suspiciously. "How did you know?" she asked. "How did you know I had it?"

"It was a trap. I didn't go to any theatre."

"I watched you go in. There's only one vaudeville show."

"I went right in and I came right out," Pel said. "It's an old Scotland Yard custom. I read it in a book."

"So what?"

"So I went home and waited. I even left the key under the mat to save anyone any bother. I

was hiding in the house when you came. I saw you go."

Salvi said, petulantly, "Will one of you please tell me what this is all about?"

Pel said, "I found the key, Salvi—on the night of the murder—in Sapolio's flat. I didn't know who had lost it. I knew it was Rena's key because it was tied with a little red thread. I let you and Rorke and Carey know that I was going out this afternoon. I thought someone would come and look for the key. I'd given you a pretty broad hint, remember. I never expected Bella."

He smiled at her, but the next moment was serious. "Listen, you two," he said. "The key's safe with Bella. But Rorke is looking for it. He was keen to find it on you, Salvi, and he had your room searched. If you want me to help you, you must trust me."

He looked from one to the other. Salvi looked doubtfully at the blonde.

Pel said, "She did a good job for you, Salvi."

The sword-walker was deep in thought. After a moment he thrust his hand beneath his shirt and pulled out a gold wedding ring. "It belonged to my dead mother," he said. "I swear by it that what I tell you will be the truth. You must swear by your own mother—"

"No." Colour came to Pel's face, and he abruptly turned his back. "I never had one to know. All I ever heard about her was lies. I never knew a father, either, if you must know. I was somebody nobody wanted."

Bella looked up at him, then quickly averted her eyes as he turned. "You've got a nice kid," she said. "I saw his cot and his photo. I couldn't help noticing."

"That's it, Pelham," Salvi cried. "Say, 'May my child be struck dead if I give you away.'"

Pel said, "I don't mind. It won't hurt the boy. May my son be struck dead if I give you away, Salvi—providing your swear by your mother's ring that you didn't kill Rena."

Salvi lifted the ring. He kissed it dramatically. "I swear."

"That's fine," Pel said. "Now we're getting places."

Salvi opened a drawer. He took out a bottle and poured two glasses. He spilled his tooth paste and brush from another and used it himself. They drank. Salvi sat on the bed. He held his glass between his knees, staring at the red wine. He said,

"It is true when I first went to Rena's flat I didn't know she lived there. I didn't know her real name. But I had been given her address. I went there to kill a man."

No one moved. At last Bella said in a whisper, "To kill a man?"

Pel said, "Who was the man?"

Salvi raised blazing eyes. He finished his drink at a gulp, and sat rolling the glass between his hands with savage intensity. "That's the hell of it," he said. "I don't know."

Pel was incredulous. "You don't know?"

"I don't know," Salvi reiterated. He got to his feet. "But I'll find him," he cried. "Somewhere I'll find him, and, when I do, by God, I'll smash him—into pulp—like that." He threw the tumbler he was holding on to the mat upon which he stood, and brought his bare foot down upon it, pounding the glass to powder.

Bella cried, "Salvi! Don't look like that."

"Take it easy," Pel said. "Don't talk so loudly, anyway."

Salvi looked from one to the other in a bewildered fashion. He sat down on the bed and clawed his head with his hands. "Well," he said, looking fiercely at Pel, "you asked for it. Now what?"

"Now," said Pel calmly, "if you want we can go into a huddle. We might be able to help each other. If you don't know this feller you wanted to kill, what made you go there?"

Salvi hesitated. "I had his address," he said at length. "At least I had the address where I expected to find him. I can't tell you why I went. Not yet."

"Tell it your own way," Pel said.

And Salvi did:

Salvi knocked at the door of the apartment on the first floor of Pimlico Flats. It was mid-afternoon. A voice called, "Come in." The door was a little ajar and he pushed it open and entered. Rena Maroni was writing at a table. She had a penny bottle of ink and a cheap pad, and she didn't look

up immediately. Her back was to him, and he did not recognize her till she turned. When she did her face flushed.

"Rena!" Salvi exclaimed, surprised.

She rose. "What do you want here?" Her voice was harsh. "How did you know I was here?"

"I didn't," he said.

"Then why have you come?"

He shut the door behind him and came towards her. "What are *you* doing here?" he asked.

"That's my business."

"And mine, maybe," he said.

She laughed bitterly. "Run away, Salvi," she said. "You're kidding yourself."

"Where's your man?"

She lit a cigarette and blew some smoke toward him. "Listen, feller," she said. "I made a fool of myself over you once. And once is plenty. But you're out and you stay out. As far as I'm concerned, you're buried three feet deep and there's a marble slab over you. Go away. Swoon into the arms—run away with Estelle. As far as I'm concerned, you don't exist. What I do with my life is my own affair.

"Now get the heck out of here. Go jump in a lake."

Salvi pulled a chair to him, straddled it and, leaning on its back, said, "You think I'm jealous, don't you? That I've come here looking for you. That I can't bear the thought of you being with someone else. Well, you're wrong, see? I don't care who you're with or what you do. I didn't

come here to see you. I came to see the man who's living with you."

"There's no one living here with me," she said, and Salvi laughed.

"I see," he said. "He just has his letters addressed here, is that it?"

Rena flushed.

"You don't have to tell me more than where he is or when he'll be here," Salvi said. "I've some business with him."

She was silent for a little time; then she asked quietly, "What sort of business?"

"I've got to settle a debt."

"I see," she said. "Paying off old scores. What did he do? Run away with your wife—or something?"

Salvi ignored her sarcasm. "Worse than that. The man I mean is worse than that."

He jumped up. "You listen to me, Rena. What I've got to see this chap about is nothing to do with you or any other woman. When I meet him it's going to be nasty. I can't drag you into this thing, but I can't just let things be—just because you're in love with him."

"Oh, shut up, shut up!" she cried. "Who told you I was in love with anyone?"

He was surprised. "Why—" he began.

"Why, *why*," she went on, exasperated. "As far as I'm concerned you can do what you please with him, and the sooner the better. You can lay him on the rails and let a tram run over him. I don't want him."

"I see," Salvi said, slowly. "I'm sorry, Rena. But why's he sticking round?"

"Sometimes," she said, "you start something you can't finish."

He said after a bit, "This bird's pretty foul."

She did not look at him. "I know it," she said. "I've learnt that. I didn't know it all the time."

"I bet you don't know just how foul," he said. "I wish I could tell you."

"Why shouldn't you?"

"You wouldn't warn him?"

She laughed at that. "I only want to be rid of him."

Salvi said, "I don't think you understand, Rena." Very quietly he added, "I came here to kill him." He lifted his coat and showed her the dagger at his belt. He took it out and turned it idly in his fingers.

"Salvi, you're mad."

"No, I'm not mad."

"What has he done to you?"

"I told you it was foul."

She hesitated a moment, then she said falteringly, "Was it—blackmail?"

He looked at her swiftly. "What makes you say that? How did you know?"

"I didn't. I—just guessed."

"Yes," he admitted. "Blackmail. That was only the beginning. It's a damnable thing to bleed a man, to make him live day after day, year after year in torment. That's what he did. And just as surely as if he'd taken a man by the throat and

strangled him or shot him dead in cold blood or poisoned him deliberately, he—this man I want—committed murder.”

He put the dagger into its sheath and slid it round the belt of his trousers. “That’s why I’m going to *kill* him.”

“Salvi,” she whispered. “You may be wrong. You might be mistaken.”

He looked directly at her. “No lies,” he said. “His name’s Gregory, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “But, Salvi, for heaven’s sake think of yourself.”

“I’ll look after myself.”

“Well, think of me. See how I’ll be dragged into this. You see, I’d have a motive too, in a way.”

“You said you wanted to get rid of him.”

She shuddered. “But not that way. You mustn’t see him here. You musn’t come here looking for him. You mustn’t come anywhere near here. Don’t you see what it would mean? In this flat, Salvi? I’ve been through enough. But I was getting out. I was going to have a showdown with Gregory. Pel’s fixing it for me to go home.”

Salvi said, “I get you, Rena. I told you I didn’t know you were here. I wouldn’t do anything to cause you trouble. I’m sorry for what I said. I can watch—and wait. But you can sleep easy till you’re back with the outfit. Maybe I’m a fool to do it like I planned. I’ll think it out. I’ll be seein’ ya, Rena.”

He was turning to go when someone rapped on the door—once sharply, then three times deliberately. Rena's eyes widened.

Salvi's lips shaped the question, "Him?" His hand went to the knife at his belt.

The girl nodded. Quickly she urged him to a door leading to her bedroom. "Lock it," she said in a whisper. "*Please!*" He obeyed her, making no sound as he stepped inside and turned the key. She called loudly, "Coming," and lifted a decanter from the sideboard and spilled some whisky on the carpet outside the bedroom door. She went to the passage door and opened it.

A man's voice said, "Good gosh. Who's been drinking?"

Rena said, "Sh!" with finger to lips. She added, "I'm sorry," and brushed her hair from her forehead. "Phew, what a party! It's a girl I know. She came in drunk. I couldn't get rid of her."

The man grunted.

Rena went on, "She was ill. She's in the bedroom lying down. Don't speak too loudly."

"The place reeks," the man said. "You're not encouraging her, are you?"

"She saw me by accident," Rena said. "She was on her way to see those people upstairs. I'll get rid of her as soon as you've gone."

"She won't come out? I don't want her to see me here."

"She'll be all right for a while."

"Any mail?"

"They're behind the clock. I wish you wouldn't have them sent here."

Salvi heard her voice as if reading. "'Madame Josephine Gregory'." She spoke with sarcasm. "So you're married now?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

She said, "I'm not interested. I thought you knew that."

The man chuckled. "You're out of sorts."

Rena said, "I've got to talk to you. But not now. I've got to see you. Please come back to-night. It's important."

"What is it?"

"Something we've got to get settled. Come after eight."

The man said, "Do you know a fellow called Pelham?"

"Pelham?"

"You heard."

"Perhaps you mean Pelham the spruiker. Everyone I know calls him Pel. He was with the dad's show one time."

There was a short silence. Then the man asked, "He hasn't been here by any chance?"

"No. Why should he?"

"He might have been invited."

"Don't be silly. I don't want to see any of the old gang. You ought to know that."

Salvi heard the man walk to the passage door. He said, "I can't stop. Get rid of your friend in there. See she don't come back—ever."

The door opened and shut.

Rena crossed to the bedroom and whispered, "Don't come out. Wait a little. Pass out my dressing-gown. It's behind the door." When he had done so, she took off her skirt. Then she put on her dressing-gown and, humming, opened the hall door and stepped out as if she were going to the bathroom at the end of the little first-floor passage.

She glanced up and down but there was no one about, and she stepped back into her apartment and closed the door. She said, "Thanks, Salvi. I think he's gone, but he may be downstairs. When you hear me sing the old trapeze music, come out and run upstairs and go and see Sapolio. You know him, don't you?"

He said yes, he was going to a party there in the evening. She went to the hall door again, and a moment later he heard her singing. He opened the door and, with quick silent strides, was out of the apartment and running up the steps to the next floor. He knocked on Sapolio's door, but, before it was opened, he heard footsteps ascending from the ground floor, and Rena Maroni's voice,

"Hello. What d'you come back for? It's all right, anyway. She's gone, thank God. Decided suddenly to go upstairs and see her friends. Wish them joy. I'm going to have a bath."

Salvi glowered at Pel and Bella as they sat watching him. "What sort of a man am I? I go to kill him. He's there, and I don't do a thing. I run away."

"I'll tell you," Pel said. "You couldn't make trouble for Rena."

"And even now I don't know what he looks like."

"But you heard his voice."

"Yes, through the door. It don't mean nothing. It was kinda muffled. I wouldn't know it again."

Bella said earnestly, putting her hand on his arm, "Forget about him, Salvi. What's it matter? Whatever he's done you can't touch him without hurting yourself. They'd find you."

Pel said, "Bella's right. You'll feel better later. You're too excitable. Sleep on it."

The sword-walker looked from one to the other. "You don't know the half of it," he said. "It keeps me awake."

Pel said, "Tell us about the telephone call. It meant something, didn't it?"

Salvi found himself a cigarette, but he didn't light it. He kept twisting it about in his long fingers.

"It wasn't a dame?" Bella asked, a trifle eagerly.

Salvi's lower lip covered the upper. He stood thinking, then he threw his cigarette away. "You might as well know the lot," he said. "When I picked up the phone someone said, 'Salvi,' but it was so low I could scarcely hear. I said, 'Speak up.' There was a lot of noise going on, remember. Then the voice whispered through the phone. I thought it was Rena, but how could it 'a' been?" He put his hand to his forehead. "But it said it

was. It said, 'Come down quick.' It sounded weird. I guessed something was the matter. I thought Gregory was there. Everyone was talking sixteen to the dozen. I slipped out and ran downstairs.

"The door of Rena's room was shut, but there was a key in the lock. I turned it and opened the door a little bit. It was dark inside. Without going right in, I felt about for the electric light switch and flicked it on."

He began striking the unlighted cigarette against the palm of his hand. "Rena was there—on the floor, twisted toward me. It was—horrible. The light was shining right on her face. I didn't need to go in. I could see from where I stood she was dead."

After a moment he went on, "I felt sick. I was half in and half out of the room. I began to get scared. I wanted to get away. I stepped right outside and pulled the door to by the key. I remember the key slipped from the lock and came away in my hand. The door didn't close tight. I mean the lock didn't snap. I'm sure of that. I ran upstairs and along the passage to Sapolio's lavabo. I was very sick.

"I must have put the key in my pocket somehow while I was ill—without knowing, I mean. When it was over I went back to the party and got a drink. Just after that we heard the scream."

Salvi crushed the cigarette he had been holding. "Now you know," he said.

"But who screamed?" Bella asked.

"It was not Rena," Pel said. "Linley told me that was impossible."

"No, no—not Rena," Salvi said. "I told you—she was lying there dead. It was awful."

"Was it Rena who phoned?" Bella asked.

Pel shook his head. "Was it a woman who phoned you?" he asked Salvi.

"It was a whisper."

Bella said, "Marie answered the phone first. She gave it to Salvi."

"If that's right," Pel said, "she might help. Leave it to me."

Bella said slowly, "I hate to say this, but Estelle was not in the room when Salvi spoke on the phone, but she was there when he returned."

"She might have gone into the kitchen—anywhere."

"Yes, of course. It wasn't her voice you heard, Salvi?"

"How do I know? I've told you. It just whispered. Anyway, how could *she* use the phone?"

"Someone mighta helped her," Bella said.

Salvi gave an impatient gesture. "I thought it was Rena speaking so no one could hear her. I didn't think about Estelle at all."

"You're sure about the key?" Pel asked.

"Sure I'm sure," Salvi returned crossly. "I remember it coming out of the door when I pulled it to. I don't remember after that. Perhaps it fell outa wherever I put it when Wang pushed us over."

Pel said, "Try and think back. The telephone was a plant. If it was just someone trying to let us know there'd been a tragedy, why pick on you? No. Someone wanted to get you down there."

"But, why, why?"

Pel said, "Now listen, Salvi. This is important. You've *got* to remember the exact words that were whispered over the wire."

Salvi stood up and picked the hairbrush from where it lay on the floor. He threw it on to the dressing table.

"That's it," he exclaimed. "I can't remember exactly. I was excited. All I got was that it was Rena and that per'aps Gregory was there and she needed help. That's what came to my mind." He looked up at Pel, frowning. "But there was something—I can't remember what. It was only a little thing, but it seemed funny."

"Funny?" Bella said.

"I mean it just didn't fit. I don't know whether I thought of it then or later. It's gone, anyway."

"Dwell on it," Pel advised. "It'll come. We'd all better call it a day." He stood up, and said, "Good night, Bella."

She opened her handbag and took out a handkerchief. "The key's in that."

He smiled. "Thanks, I'll look after it."

She rose and held the handkerchief out to him and, as he was about to take it, there was a heavy step outside. A voice called, "You there, Salvi?" The door opened and, uninvited, Rorke stepped into the room.

"Well, well," Rorke said, as they turned and faced him. "Look who's here! Little Pel, of *course*. And the beautiful tattooed lady! And what have you all been talking about?"

Bella moved to open her bag but Rorke stretched out, and a heavy paw closed over the hand that held the handkerchief and key.

"Let me alone," Bella cried.

"Oh, no," Rorke said. "I'll look after this." He took the handkerchief from her as Linley came into the room. Rorke turned to him triumphantly. "Look what we got," he said. "*Now* ain't you glad we came?"

He placed the handkerchief on the bed and carefully unfolded it, revealing a latch-key. "Oh, looky, looky!" he said, and glanced at Linley. "Now I wonder what they'd be playing about with a key for? I told you, Linley, this joint's full of mischief. What can you expect with a set of freaks spilt over every room—giants, armless wonders, midgets, beautiful tattooed ladies, and little Pel set right in the midst of 'em?"

He folded up the key and offered it, with the handkerchief, to Linley. "Maybe, if you dust that off, you'll find something interesting. I'll lay odds it's the key of the Maroni dame's flat."

Linley said to Bella, "Raise any objections?"

She was about to speak when Pel interposed. "What's the use? You've got the key. Don't say anything, Bella."

Linley stowed the key and handkerchief in his pocket, and Rorke said, "So little Pel's not so

cocky now." He turned to Linley. "It's my opinion the whole bunch of 'em was in it."

Pel said in a curiously subdued tone, "You've got to guess right sometime." He added after a bit, "Can we go home?"

Linley thought a moment. "I'd like the three of you in my office at nine to-morrow."

Rorke said to Bella, "I hope that will suit your ladyship."

She went to Salvi's mirror and started to powder her face. Over her shoulder she said, "When they bury you, Flatfoot, reserve me a front seat."

Pel said good night and walked downstairs.

Big Minnie was waiting in the hall. She said, "Whatever is it, Mr Pelham? This is a respectable house."

"Don't worry," Pel said. "It'll come right."

"I hope so," she said earnestly. "I've booked in the Carick Family—eight of them—at the end of the month. Such a refined act."

Pel walked out of the building and ran into Professor Smith, dapper as ever, a large flower in his buttonhole.

"Bella!" he cried. "Where is she? Is she with Salvi?"

Pel hesitated, and the other went on, "One day I'll break her neck." He paused as the thought struck him. "No, I won't. It's too beautiful. Have you ever noticed it, Mr Pelham? How it is set on the shoulders like the statue of a Greek goddess!" He turned away abruptly. "I will go up."

"No," Pel said, detaining him. "Don't go up."

"But I must," the professor cried. "I can't wait. Salvi can go to the dickens. I want Bella. I want to see her now. I can't sleep till I've seen her. The most wonderful idea has come to me, Mr Pelham. It's for the back of her knees. It's tantalized me for months, but I've got it at last. Look!"

He fumbled excitedly in his pocket and produced a rough sketch, and spread it against the wall of the apartment house. "See," he cried, "this is Bella's leg—back view." His finger tapped the paper. "*Here* I put a great gargoyle, the fringe of the whiskers at the top of the calf, well away from the snake. Here, the big red mouth, with yellow forked teeth, and the lolling tongue—purple perhaps, yes, purple. And above, the head. Don't you see? When she stands, so, with her leg straight, it will be a gargoyle in repose, *but* when she *bends* her knee, so—" he lifted his long coat tails and demonstrated—"bending and unbending, it will look just like a devil champing his jaws."

He put the paper away. "I've got to see her, Salvi or no Salvi. To-morrow, early, I must make the stencil. To-night I must make the measurements. To think, Mr Pelham—to think that for a whole year I haven't known what to do with the back of her knees, and then, in a flash—like that—it comes!"

Linley and Rorke emerged from big Minnie's apartment house. They paused, and Rorke said,

"Here's another. The place is crawling with 'em." He turned to the professor, "What's he been saying?" he asked.

The professor blinked at him behind his glasses. "He hasn't been saying," he said, mildly. "I've been saying."

Pel said dryly, "He's got a great idea for tattooing Bella."

"God!" Rorke exclaimed. "I thought he'd covered all that territory." He was turning to follow Linley, but paused. "Wait a bit," he drawled, and took the professor by the arm. "Come over here."

"I—I'm in a hurry," the professor said, wriggling.

Rorke held him firmly, and urged him under a street lamp so that the light fell full on his frightened face. After a moment's close scrutiny he said, "All right," and rejoined Linley.

As they walked away Linley said, "Know him?"

Rorke shook his head. "He's nuts, anyway. They're all nuts if you ask me."

Linley smiled.

CHAPTER TEN

IT was to be a busy morning for Pel Pelham. Sapolio was going cranky, and he expected brisk business. He was glad Linley had made an early appointment. On his way to the tomb he called on Speel, the printer, to pick up some post-cards. Speel was already on the job.

"Come on in, Pel," he called. "They're a-drying nicely. I'll give you a few to go on with, and I'll send the others round."

Pel half sat on the bench watching the old man make up the parcel. Idly his eyes travelled to a spoilt proof lying face-up on the floor. He picked it up, and read:

MADAME JOSEPHINE GREGORY

Costumes
Lingerie

30 Albany St
Eslington

ADDRESS ALL CORRESPONDENCE
BOX 0093X

Speel said with a twinkle, "Figurin' on buyin' any lingerie, Pel?"

"You never know," Pel said.

"Well," Speel commented as he tied the string, "she's a real stylish piece if you like blondes. Come in herself and ordered them cards. Does a big country biz. That's why she wanted that there

bottom line so bold. Kinda seems to spoil the balance to me."

Pel pursed his lips and regarded the proof critically, holding it by the edges. "So it does," he said. "Still, I suppose, mother knows best." He folded the piece of paper and put it in his pocket. "I'll show it to the wife." He took his postcards. "See Dad Maroni?" he asked.

The old printer shook his head.

"He ain't been in," he said. "Too bad that. I kinda don't like goin' to the funeral. I guess he don't want to see no one—even his friends."

"That's how it is," Pel said. "He'll come round, though."

Speel shook his head sadly. "A nasty business," he said, and looked up. "Curse the fellow that did it!"

Pel said, "Amen, pal."

In Linley's office, Bella sat stiffly upright between Pel and Salvi. Despite the early hour she was well groomed, her blonde hair neat, her hat fashionable, her make-up impeccable. Salvi's eyes were fixed on his patent shoes, his tie hung loosely and untidily, his clothes were crumpled as if he had slept in them. Pel was immaculate. He held his bowler on his knees, and watched Linley at the desk opposite.

Rorke came in and sat down at Linley's side. He took no notice of the trio opposite, but addressed the detective. "Well?" he said.

Linley picked up a paper from his desk. He turned it over in his fingers, and put it down again.

"What about the prints?" Rorke asked impatiently.

Linley had been looking across at Pel, a peculiar expression in his eyes. "The prints? Oh, yes. The prints on the key are Pelham's. There is no doubt about it."

Bella uttered an exclamation. Even Salvi raised his eyes. Pel caught the look of surprise on Rorke's face, but the next moment the plain-clothes man was standing up and striking the desk with the palm of his hand. "Pel," he cried. "Little Pelham!" He grinned across the room. "Well, I'm *not* surprised."

Linley continued his observation of Pel, who shifted uneasily under his gaze. The detective turned to Rorke and said, "The prints on the key you took from Bella last night are Pelham's prints all right, but—"

"But what?" Rorke demanded.

"But," Linley said, dryly, "the key doesn't fit the lock we took from the Maroni girl's door."

Rorke's eyes smouldered. He stared unbelievably at Linley. "Then what were they playing round with it for? What key is it?"

Linley shook his head. "Perhaps Pelham will tell us."

Pel carefully brushed his bowler with the sleeve of his coat. He looked a little embarrassed. "I don't mind," he said. He looked directly at

Linley. "It's my latch-key," he said calmly. "The key of my front door."

Rorke stared at him speechlessly. Linley said, "Satisfied Rorke?" and added, "You can easily prove it."

Rorke came to life. "No," he cried. "By thunder, no. He's up to something. If it's your latch-key, Pelham, why all that play last night? What was the tattooed dame doing with your house key?"

If Pelham had known how, he would have blushed. He looked down at his toes. "One must have friends, Mr Rorke," he said, demurely.

When they were outside, Pelham studiously avoided Bella's eyes, but the blonde planted herself in front of him and held him by the lapels of his coat. Her mischievous eyes twinkled.

"So that's the sort of woman I am, Mr Pelham?"

Pel said, "Sorry, Bella. No one would believe it—except Rorke."

She laughed. "I don't know what it's all about yet," she said, "but it was worth it to see that flatfoot's face."

Pel said, "What you doing this morning?"

"Nothing," she replied. "This afternoon the professor's fitting me for a gargoyle."

"I see. Listen, Salvi. Promise to carry on as if nothing has happened. I got a hunch things are coming right. Bella, go to this address." He took from his pocket the proof he had picked up at Speel's, and copied the address on an envelope.

"Have a look round and see what you can find. Make some excuse about clothes."

She looked at the scrap of paper. "Gee!" she said. "How do you do it? Salvi, say hello and farewell to Bella, the girl detective!"

It was too early for much business and there was no one in Sapolio's shop except the lanky Cecil, who was executing a few intricate dancing steps for the edification of the starving man. Sapolio had refrained from shaving for two days. He hadn't done his hair. In fact he had undone it. He was collarless, his shirt open at the front.

Pel told Cecil to be more careful, and regarded Sapolio with approval.

A few visitors came in and the starving man began to walk up and down, snarling to himself and kicking the wastepaper basket out of his path.

Pel began to spruik outside the shop. Delphine was in the box with a plentiful supply of tickets and a box of chocolates. Cecil, lately admonished, was standing demurely at the door, his feet at attention. When a few had gathered Delphine gave a signal, and Ricketty emerged and addressed Pel loudly.

"You oughta be ashamed of yourself exhibiting a madman," he said, and for once Pel appeared at a loss for words. He just gaped.

"Ah, you've got nothing to say," Ricketty went on. "I tell you I've been watchin'. I've been here day after day. I can tell. The man's mad. You'd

be mad—any man'd be mad—imprisoned like a wild beast! Kept without food for five days! Mark my words, young man, he'll smash his way out of that glass house before many hours have gone by, and a good job, too."

He walked away haughtily while Pel, after a whispered word with Delphine and looking very agitated, went inside. Delphine said, but not too loudly, "Admission sixpence."

Ricketty sauntered to the corner and round the block, up a right-of-way, through a gate, and into the backyard of the shop he had just left.

Carey came in looking worried. "Seen my giant?" he asked Pel, and poured out his troubles. "He won't stay put. Half the town's seeing him for nothing. It ain't decent. He's got no business morality. But, joking aside, Pel, he's got me worried stiff. I keep thinking about him at the party. He did go out of the room, you know.

"And when he does stay put," Carey went on, "I'm worrying just looking at him. He sits grinning, with his arms out—like this." He held out his hands, one a little higher than the other. "Then," he went on, "his fingers curl and spread out, and he moves his hands up and down and chuckles. It's not pretty, Pel. It's just as if he's recalling something. It gets on my nerves."

Pel put his hands on Carey's arm. "No," he said. "I can't believe it. He's not bad."

"I *know*," Carey said. "But p'raps he just doesn't know. He sees something and wants it. A neck p'raps. He's so infernally strong."

Pel shuddered. "Don't," he said. "You're getting on my nerves. I don't believe it at all. But keep your eye on him. Better have someone tail him up."

"That's right," Carey said. "Build up the overhead. Fancy me christening him the Terror of Pekin! I'm scared of him myself."

A man said to Pel, indicating Sapolio, "'E doesn't look too good."

"This is always the danger period," Pel explained patiently, taking him by the arm and speaking in great confidence. "The next few days will tell the tale. Either he'll break the glass or break the record." He walked over to a fat man who was staring with his face close to the glass. "Excuse me, sir," he said. "Don't stand too near him."

Bella was back very soon. She passed into the shop with a nod and a smile for Delphine. She waited on the outskirts of the little crowd, standing on a chair and looking over the men's heads. Sapolio was sitting on his unmade bed, running his hands through his hair.

A man on the outer rim turned and surveyed the blonde's shapely legs with some interest. Pel came along and lightly tapped her black silk stocking with his cane. "Now, now. No opposition," he said quietly. She stepped down.

"There's no such place," she told him. "The street's there all right, but if Madame Josephine's making knickers for the nobs she's doing it in the middle of five vacant allotments."

Pel took the printer's proof from his pocket. He looked at the boldly set line at the bottom—BOX 0093X. "Kinda throws it outa balance," he murmured. He put the paper back into his pocket. "Thanks, Bella. You've been a big help. One day perhaps you'll be a sergeant."

She looked about her at the crowd of men. "Some business, Pel!"

He nodded, regarding her trim figure with admiration. "D'you know something, Bella? If you turned on the professor's pictures right now they'd stampede. They'd leave poor old poppa flat. They'd turn their backs on him."

"Oh, yeah," she said. "And then he really would break out of his cage."

Pel left her at the door. "'Bye," she said. "What the heck's a gargoye, Pel?"

He said, "I'm not quite sure. From what I guess, it's as well it's going on the back of your knee. You won't have to look at it."

"What a life!" she exclaimed. "The back of the knee! Can you beat it? My gosh, Pel. The places he thinks of!" She waggled her fingers at him, and passed through the portals. To Delphine she said in an affected voice and rather loudly, "Thank you very much. It's been most interesting. I do hope the poor man survives. I'll tell all my friends."

Delphine said, "Thank you, madam," and ate another chocolate.

Pel came out and tapped the window. "Society's loveliest women find their way to Sapolio's tomb,

and gaze in fascinated horror at this strange spectacle. The Governor's lady—"he gesticulated towards Bella's retreating figure—"and Bridget O'Grady—the same under the skin—come to visit Sapolio . . ."

Marie came in a little later, plump and smiling. She gave one look at Sapolio's unshaven face and rumpled hair and threw up her hands in horror. "Ah! 'E looks like 'e makes zee trip to Devil's Island," she said, but, over the heads of customers, she contrived a companionable wink.

Pel had a quiet word with her. "Remember the night of the party, Marie? Someone telephoned to Salvi."

"Telephone?" Marie frowned in concentration. "But, yes. I remember."

"It was a lady."

"No, m'sieur, no. It was a gentleman. 'E say, 'If you please, zis is a call for M'sieur Salvi'."

"You are sure?"

"But yes, Pel. I remember very well. I say to myself, ' 'E is one of these stupid foreigners'."

"French?" Pel's eyes twinkled.

"French? Non, non, non. Not French."

"He asked especially for Monsieur Salvi? He did not say Mister Salvi."

" 'E say *M'sieur* Salvi. But 'is accen' it is terrible—worse than yours, mon ami. I do not know what nation 'e is, but 'e is not Francais."

A smartly dressed woman with fair hair, fashionably set, sat in a quiet corner of a quiet cafe. A

man sauntered in and sat down beside her. He ordered coffee for two. When the waitress had gone he said, "Did you get them?"

She took a slip of paper and two keys from her bag, then dug down and pulled out a little bundle. She passed them all across the table.

"Did they ask questions?"

"No," she said. "I showed them the card, paid the money, and got the receipt. There it is with the keys. Here's the card I used. The rest are in the bundle."

He dropped them in his pocket as the waitress returned with the coffee. When she left, the woman leaned over and said, "What's the real idea, Joe?"

He said, "It's too dangerous. I'm thinking of you."

She smiled a little cynically.

He went on, "You've got your steamer ticket and passport?"

She nodded.

"I'll be on the wharf to see you go. I'll find a way to get in touch with you. Don't you write till you hear."

"I understand," she said.

There was something in her tone that made him say, "Listen, Josie, it was good while it lasted. It's set you up."

"You haven't done so badly yourself."

"Look at the risk," he said.

"What about me? I don't want another dose—and a bigger one."

The man said, "That's what I'm thinking of. If anything goes wrong it'll be bad for you. That's why it's better that you get out now."

"I see," she said. "Good Samaritan." She gathered up her gloves and bag. "No good prolonging the agony." Suddenly she put her things down again, and said earnestly, "There isn't another woman, is there?"

"Don't be silly," he said. He put out his hand and patted her wrist roughly. "I'll be seeing you. We'll team up again somewhere."

She rose. "You better wait," she said. "I feel better for the coffee and for what you said. 'Bye.'" Under cover of the table her hand sought his, but found only the sleeve of his coat. She squeezed it and, without looking back, hurried out of the cafe.

He poured another cup of coffee, took a cigar from his pocket, bit the end off, lit it, and sat on.

Later in the day Pel found time to run round and see Linley. He hadn't been invited, but the detective seemed glad to see him. They had quite a talk. When they finished Pel said, "I guess that's all for now."

He paused at the door and looked round at Linley, leaning on his desk. "I meant to ask you," he said, "what's a Galahad. I got an idea. But it ain't clear."

Linley smiled broadly.

"Galahad was a knight," he explained. "Quite a feller. Always rescuing ladies in distress."

Pel considered that. But he didn't smile. Instead he said, "Those letters! You didn't show 'em to old Maroni?"

Linley shook his head.

"Will you?"

"Not unless it's necessary. No need to rub salt in the wound. Don't let it worry you."

Pel put on his bowler and looked at Linley keenly. "Thanks, pal," he said, and went out.

Pel returned to the shop. Business was warming up. Even the lanky Cecil was getting excited. Sapolio wasn't the only one acting his head off. Ricketty, in an excess of zeal, was becoming a trifle too vehement in his periodic denunciations, and had to be tactfully restrained. Pel decided to miss lunch. If Sapolio could do it, he could.

He took from his pocket a list that Skin Rogers had given him, and ran his finger down the names; then he called a taxi, and drove out to a suburb.

Getting out of the cab, he walked down a street and turned into a small stationer's shop. He spoke to the little man with weak eyes who was smoking a cigar behind the counter. "Hello, Sam."

Sam Kitching said, "Hello, Pel. Where you been hiding? Ain't seen you for months."

"Just come out of jail," Pel said, grinning.

"I *don't* think," Kitching said. "They don't catch your sort."

Pel placed a couple of small bets. "How's biz?" he asked.

"It's all right."

"They leaving you alone?"

Kitching look up suspiciously. "Who?"

"Come off it," Pel said. "Skin Rogers told me all you boys are making a pay-out."

"No one worries me," Kitching said, and turned away.

"You're lucky," Pel said. "I was hoping you could give me a lead, Sam."

"Yes?"

Pel paused and looked round carefully. "Know a feller called Gregory?" he asked.

The starting-price man paused quite an appreciable time before he replied, "Nope."

"Oh," Pel looked nonplussed. "It's like this, Sam. I'm running that starving-man joint."

"I heard about it," Kitching said.

"Well," Pel went on, "you know what these things are. A man's got to eat sometime, hasn't he. It stands to reason. I get the office in a round-about way that Gregory is on to me."

Kitching took the cigar from his mouth, interested.

"I'm told I've got to make a pay-out or I'll be busted," Pel said. "But it may be a bluff. I don't see anybody. All I get is an address—two addresses. The first is care of some dame in Pimlico Flats and the other cancels the first. I got to make the pay-out to some box number."

Kitching's eyes flickered.

Pel went on, "I don't know what to do." He bit his finger vexatiously.

The other said, "Mind you, I don't know nothing, Pel. If you can stand the racket I'd pay."

"Meaning you do?"

"The bit I hand out don't hurt. I put it down to advertising."

"But who is Gregory?"

"I got my ideas," Kitching said. "But ideas ain't proof. Anyway, even if I was right, what good would it do me? Most of the boys think the same."

"Many making a pay-out?"

"You'd be surprised," Kitching said. "But they ain't worried, because it ain't big. I guess it mounts up, though. Tell you something, Pelham. Us s.p. men are small fry to this guy. I got a whisper. You know how you pick up things in this game. Gregory's big fish are dames. The dilly ones that go off the track. He finds out about 'em. Get me?"

"I get you," Pel said. "He's two ends of a——" He stopped as a woman came into the shop.

"Whatever you were going to say," Kitching said, "I double it."

He walked over to his customer. "What can I do for you, madam?"

As Pel left he heard her say, "I want a packet of cigarettes, and two bob on Speed King in the first."

Estelle, the armless girl, sat before a low, flat stool. On the stool there was a bottle of ink and a writing pad. Pel was holding the writing pad

steady. Holding the pen with her toes, the girl dipped into the ink and wrote as he dictated. She wrote slowly and carefully, like a conscientious school-child. When she had finished Pel gave her an envelope, and she wrote an address.

Dan Carey, who was sitting in the corner, said, "Good girl."

Micklewitz, the midget, went over and put a cigarette between her lips and lit it for her. Pel sealed and stamped the envelope.

Carey said, "I'll be glad when this is over. It takes your mind off business."

Estelle said to Bella, "Are you all set, Bella?"

The blonde girl laughed. She stood up and recited, "The art of tattooing has been handed down from the earliest times. It was practised by the ancients in their religious rites and ceremonies. Tattooing is sometimes accompanied by great pain, and only the strongest can stand up to it. It is a slow and painful process. This gargoyle, for instance—"

Carey laughed. "Spare us, Bella. Where's the professor?"

She said, "I did you a good turn. Now he's finished his academy work he feels like a holiday till the unveiling. I sent him over to play cards with Wang."

"That's the stuff," Carey said. He was still anxious about his giant.

Pel left them, and went out and posted the letter Estelle had written. Before he did so he grinned

to himself, and wiped the surface clean with the edge of his sleeve.

It was two o'clock in the morning. Outside Sapolio's shop the street was deserted. There was no movement. But, inside the shop, Sapolio moved restlessly up and down his glass prison, although there was no one watching him. Ricketty, who had replaced the night watchman, was sitting on the other side of the curtains in the ticket box.

Now and again Sapolio's pacing ceased, and he leaned his face against the glass nearest the door. He was trying to make up his mind. Close by, the post-office clock chimed the quarter hour.

Rorke turned a corner and strolled slowly toward the shop, a solitary figure. He stood outside and spoke to Ricketty. To his surprise there was no response. He walked closer and looked at the man. He was fast asleep. With a shrug of the shoulders Rorke passed into the shop.

It gave him a slight shock to see Sapolio leaning against the glass, staring. His face was a ghastly white, his eyes bloodshot. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation of pain, and his hand went to his side. A spasm shook his frame, but he recovered, and beckoned Rorke to the far end of the tomb near the back door of the shop.

He said, as Rorke put his face close to the glass, "You are Mistaire Roger, yes? But, I am glad you 'ave come, m'sieur. I am ver' ill. Somet'ing 'as gone inside me. Please—" he looked cau-

tiously toward the entrance—"you do somet'ing to 'elp me?"

Rorke did not reply. He was thinking hard. He was wondering why Sapolio called him by another name. The fasting man's hand went to his side again. When the spasm had passed he said, "M'sieur Roger, you are good frien' to Pel. I do not tell zee police I see you."

Rorke stood stock-still. He did not speak. After a bit he looked about him carefully and said, "See me? When?"

Sapolio looked surprised. "Pel, 'e no tell you? Zee night M'amselle Maroni is kill. I 'urry for get some olives. I come back. It is in zee 'all I see you—at 'er door. She say, 'Mistaire Roger, oh!' Like zat. I remember so well. An' zen you go in 'er room. But I tell to no one. Only Pel."

A spasm shook him again, doubling him up. He pulled the front of his shirt open. "M'sieur Roger, you do somet'ing for me, *please?*"

Rorke said, "Wait." He tiptoed to the front door. Ricketty was still asleep. He returned to Sapolio. "What is it?" he asked.

Sapolio said, "It is a little t'ing, but it always 'elp. No one mus' know, m'sieur. Please to get me one slice—jus' one little slice—of 'am fat. You un'erstan'? It make me good. You pass through 'ere. No one know. Yes?" He indicated the letter slit.

Rorke hesitated a moment, then he nodded.

"Wait," he said, and, unlocking the back door, stepped out, leaving it a little open.

He went through the yard, out the gate, and quickly down the right-of-way into the street. He walked swiftly, and stopped at a coffee stall near a newspaper office. As he seated himself on a stool he called, "Give me a ham sandwich, Charlie. Pronto."

Charlie lifted a glass cover. "There you are, Mr Rorke. Nice an' fresh."

Rorke said, "Thanks—and some coffee." He picked up the sandwich and, under cover of the counter, slipped out the meat and dropped it into his side pocket. When Charlie returned with the coffee he was eating the bread. He chatted till it had gone, called good night, and sauntered off.

Soon he quickened his footsteps and, making a short cut, was at his office. Here he was busy for a few minutes before retracing his steps. He listened outside the rear door of the shop, and peeped in. There was no one there but Sapolio. The fasting man's eyes were on the door, and gleamed eagerly as Rorke entered and went to the letter slit.

Sapolio said, "No one 'as been in. You get 'im?"

Rorke took from his pocket a sliver of ham resting on a piece of paper. He slid the fat through the slit, and, as Sapolio took it greedily, withdrew the paper. With a match he set fire to it, stamped it out, scattering the fragments.

Sapolio half smiled. He nodded his approval. "You good fellow, M'sieur Roger. This makes Sapolio okeydoke again." He swallowed the fat.

Rorke watched him, fascinated, for a second or two; then he tiptoed to the curtained entrance. Ricketty was still sleeping. He went to the back door, looked over his shoulder at Sapolio, who waved, and slipped out.

When he had gone Sapolio sat down and began a note to Pel. He had written only a few lines when he suddenly slumped in his chair, the pen fell from his hands, and his eyes rolled. He rose with an effort, staggered to his bed, and collapsed, moaning.

Ricketty, awakening refreshed, looked about him guiltily. The post-office clock chimed a quarter to. He stretched himself and walked up and down in front of the shop. There was a policeman standing at the corner. Ricketty rather hoped he would stroll down and have a yarn. He went inside the shop and stopped dead.

Sapolio was standing by his bed, his face contorted. He was trying to speak. His mouth opened and shut, a paroxysm shook him, and he nearly fell, clutching at the back of a chair for support.

He saw Ricketty staring helplessly, and suddenly lifted a soda-water bottle from his table and hurled it with all his might. The glass splintered, and in a trice he was clawing at the broken pane with his bare hands. A huge piece of glass gave way and fell with a crash inside the tomb, and he began

to clamber out, but as Ricketty gazed, horrified, his head jerked upward, and he fell forward over the jagged glass.

Ricketty, horror-stricken, didn't move. All power seemed to have deserted his legs. The thing he had prophesied so often to the idlers outside had come true. With an effort he recovered himself, and stepped over Sapolio's body. There was blood everywhere. He put his hand on the fasting man's shoulder and tried to turn his face around, but he was too heavy. Almost ready to cry, Ricketty stood, bewildered, looking about him helplessly. His eye fell on the paper Sapolio had been writing. It had fallen to the ground, and, mechanically, Ricketty picked it up.

Someone called from outside, "Anyone here?"

He stuffed the paper into his pocket and cried, "Quick! Help!"

A man came round the corner, peering. He said, "Good God!" and ran out and brought the policeman from the corner.

The police car brought Pel from his home. White and trembling he stood by his friend's dead body, listening to the doctor. Sapolio had been poisoned. There was no doubt about it in the medical mind. Still, there would be a proper examination, of course.

Linley came up. "This is an awful business, Pelham."

They had questioned Ricketty, and in the end he broke. He remembered two o'clock striking.

He woke at a quarter to three. It was during that forty-five minutes it happened, and he was inconsolable.

Linley conjectured, "He might have poisoned himself."

Pel shook his head.

"Well," the detective said, "how could he get it? Come clean, Pelham. The starving man's secrets don't matter now. How did you feed him?"

"We didn't," Pel said. "It was on the level. The only way he could get anything would be through here." He led the way to the letter slit.

Linley bent down and examined the little aperture. He said, "You could pass enough poison through here to kill a dozen—on a sandwich, for instance, cut thin."

There was a sudden interruption from Ricketty. "I knew there was something, Pel," he cried. "Look." He showed them the paper he had picked up from the floor of Sapolio's tomb, and told them where he had found it. "See," he said, "it says something about a bit of ham—"

Linley snatched the paper. He read swiftly. "Rogers!" he exclaimed. He handed the paper to Pel, who held it with trembling fingers.

"Where does Rogers live?" Linley asked.

Pel told him.

"By himself?"

"He has a chap does things for him."

"Come on," Linley said. "We'll go round." He gave some orders.

Pel said, "What about Sapolio's wife? Marie, I mean."

Linley looked at his watch. "It's very early," he said. "Bad news can wait. What could she do, anyway?"

At Rogers's flat they rang a number of times. Rogers's man opened the door at last.

"Where's Mr Rogers?" Linley asked, pushing his way in. "I'm the police."

"The police." The man was palpably shaken.

"Yes," said Linley, testily. "Get Mr Rogers up."

"But, sir, he's not here," the man said.

Pel said, "Not here? Where is he?"

"I wasn't to tell anyone," the man said. "Mr Rogers particularly told me not to tell anyone, but—but as it seems to be a—a police matter, I suppose I'd better."

"You'd better," Linley said with meaning.

"Well, sir, Mr Rogers is at the Belgrave Hotel. You see, sir, he was married last night. He's on his honeymoon."

Linley looked at Pel blankly.

Pel was thinking of the note he had read. He said, "Linley, I'm a fool. Check up on Skin. Don't spoil his honeymoon. You don't want him."

"No," Linley said with slight sarcasm. "Then whom do we want?"

"If you and me can talk quietly," Pel said, "we'll know to-morrow night."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IT had grown colder, and there was a fire burning brightly in the room in which Rena Maroni had died. Drawn up to it was a big, easy chair, its back to the hall door. Estelle, the armless girl, sat in it knitting. Occasionally she glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. She was listening hard.

At last there was a knock upon the door. The girl dropped her knitting and stood up, slipping her stockinged feet into her shoes. She walked over and stood by the door.

"Please come in," she said. "Push."

Rorke entered.

Estelle said, "Oh, it's you. I didn't expect—I was waiting—" She stopped in confusion.

"Waiting for what?" He stepped into the room, uninvited.

"I'm expecting a message about my show," she said. "Marie has the phone, you know—Marie Sapolio." She indicated the big chair. "Won't you sit down? I suppose you want to ask me some questions. If you wouldn't mind, I'll run up and give Marie a message, then we can talk. That's if—"

"Go ahead," he said with unexpected affability. "It'll keep five minutes."

"I won't be long," she said, and was out of the room. She pulled the door with her foot, and he heard the lock click.

Very swiftly he crossed and opened the door of the adjoining bedroom, and looked round. He opened a wardrobe door and peered inside. He looked under the bed. Then he went into the kitchenette. Returning, he busied himself about the living-room for a moment or two, and then sat down in the easy chair and crossed his legs comfortably before the blaze, his back to the door.

When he heard it open he said, without turning, "You weren't long."

There was no response and, without getting up, he turned his head and looked over his shoulder. Pel was standing inside the room, a suitcase in his hand. The other hand held a key, and was reaching for the door as if he were about to beat a hasty retreat.

"Come back here," Rorke cried, springing to his feet, and Pel obeyed reluctantly. He put his suitcase down and came forward.

"What is this?" Rorke asked. "A love nest?"

Pel said, "What are you doing here, Rorke?"

Rorke snapped, "*Mr* Rorke to you, and *I* do the asking."

Pel took out a cigarette. "I'm not answering anything without a lawyer."

"Oh yes, you are. What's this sudden interest in the armless wonder? What are you doing with a key to her flat?"

"I'm her friend," Pel said, surly. "Can't a man have a friend?"

Rorke laughed nastily. "And you're Bella's friend, too. It seems to me you perverts go round swopping women."

Pel said quietly, "There's one key I haven't got."

"Oh, yeah."

"The key to Box 0093X."

There was silence, while Rorke glared. Pel's eyes did not falter. Rorke said at length, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You should know—Mr Gregory."

Rorke stared for a moment, then he said, "You're nuts. Talk some way I can understand."

Pel threw his cigarette into the fire. His eye wandered to the clock. He turned on Rorke. "All right," he said. "And keep your ears peeled. You're Joseph Gregory, care Madame Josephine Gregory, 30 Albany Street, Eslington—an address which doesn't exist. You're a cheap crook and a blackmailer."

"You little swine," Rorke interrupted angrily. "You dare—"

"Shut up and listen," Pel said, and there was confidence and authority in his tone. "Your real address is a post-office box. I've already told you the number."

Rorke's face was livid. "By God," he cried, "I don't know what you mean, but I'll get you for it. You'll have to prove—"

Pel shook his head. "Speel the printer has supplied the proofs."

Just for the fraction of a second an expression of relief crossed the other's face. "Speel!" he said. "I don't know him. Oh, you're mad. You've been among freaks too long."

Pel said calmly, "Madame what's-her-name got a printing job done. When you read the proof for your little business card you made a wonderful set of fingerprints."

Rorke's mouth fell open. His fists clenched as if he would strike. Then his expression changed to one of cunning. He looked at the closed door. "You poor little mutt," he said. "I'll soon alibi myself out of that."

Pel took out another cigarette, and offered his case. "You admit you're Gregory?"

Rorke waved the case away. He laughed. With another glance at the door he said, "Why shouldn't I—to you?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, Mr Smart Alick Pelham, that the word of Joseph Rorke means more in this town than the word of a little shyster showman who is running a fake starving man."

"Was running," Pel corrected.

"A dirty little snipe," Rorke continued, "who's been just clever enough to keep out of jail all his little rotten life. Who's going to believe *you*?"

Pel shrugged. "I got friends," he said.

"Freaks!" Rorke said. "Fake tattooed women,

giants, midgets—all the riff-raff of the carnivals. No one decent's going to believe you. If I'm Joseph Gregory for business reasons, that's my affair. Well, I am Joseph Gregory, and much good may it do you! We're all alone, Mr Pelham, and we can exchange confidences. But when we go out of here I'm going to forget every little word I've said to you. Every little word."

From his pocket he pulled a small cigar, and with an impatient gesture bit off the end and spat it into the grate. He struck a match, let the cigar draw for a minute, and said, "Yes, my dear shyster, I can alibi myself out of Mr Speel's precious proof, if there is such a thing."

"Oh, there is," Pel said. "Indeed there is." He fished in his pocket, and brought it out.

Rorke leaned forward and snatched the paper.

"Give that back," Pel cried excitedly.

Rorke easily held him away. "What a simple little fellow it is," he said. "Now we'll drop Mr Speel's nasty little proof into the fire—so—and nasty little Pel will be believed less than ever."

Pel rushed at him. "Curse you, Rorke!" he cried. "Some day someone's going to choke the life out of you like you choked the life out of Rena Maroni."

Rorke dropped his cigar and seized Pel's arms. He held him easily, but the grip was savage. "You little swine!" he said between clenched teeth. "There's one thing you've got to learn. Murder's

the only crime for which you can't suffer twice. I ought to kill you now, just as I killed Renie Maroni. Yeah, I can tell you that, too, Mr Clever. Just between ourselves like, because you can't do a thing. Because, when you tell it, what will they say? They'll say it's little Pel's imagination. It's his inventive genius. Pelham hates Rorke because Rorke's on to him, and he'll say anything. They'll laugh at you, you crazy bit of spit!"

He threw Pel away from him so that he fell back on the big chair, where he sat, his head in his hands, muttering, "Fancy you telling me this and I can't do a thing!"

Rorke patted him on the shoulder with mock commiseration. He said, "Don't be downhearted. Store it up in your mind. Spill the beans. See if they'll believe you."

"They won't," Pel said miserably.

"The two most sensible words you've ever said." Rorke spoke lightly. "But watch your step, Pelham. I don't let anyone stand in my way. Get me?"

"I get you. Leave me alone and I'm dumb."

"You'd better be." He looked at the clock on the mantel. "Where the heck is your freak friend?"

Pel got to his feet. "I guess," he said, "she's gone to fetch Linley." Rorke swung round on him, but before he could reply there was a rap on the door. Pel, with a quick movement, crossed the room and opened it. Rorke's right hand

dropped to his coat pocket and he stood, rigid, as Carey stepped inside.

"So he came," Carey said.

"What's all this?" Rorke exclaimed.

Pel ignored him. He stooped and picked up the cigar Rorke had dropped, and gave it to the showman. "What's that smell like, Dan?"

Carey sniffed. "It's the same awful stench that was in this room the night we found Rena dead."

"They're smoked only in times of stress," Pel observed, taking the cigar and putting it in his pocket.

Rorke glowered at the two men, and was about to speak when Linley pushed his way in, followed by Estelle and Bella, with Salvi bringing up the rear.

"What's going on here?" the detective asked.

Rorke spoke quickly. "They've all gone crazy. The whole bunch of them."

Pel said, "Mr Linley, Rorke has told me that he is Joe Gregory. He also confessed he murdered Rena Maroni."

"He's crazy, Linley," Rorke cried. "Something's gone to his head. I might as well say *he* confessed he killed the dame himself, *and* that lunatic in the glass house."

"When did he confess, Pelham?" Linley asked gravely. He did not look into Rorke's eyes, but kept his own a little lowered, as if he were loath to hear a charge against a colleague.

Rorke answered him, his voice full of sarcasm. "Tell him, little Pel. *When?*"

"Just now," Pel said. "A moment or two before you came in."

"Was Carey here?"

"No," Pel said.

Rorke grinned. "Carry on with the farce," he said. "Don't mind me."

Linley said, "It means little without a witness, Pelham."

"He's a dangerous little ——" Rorke said, using an unpleasant epithet.

"I told you, Mr Linley, that I'd have a witness," Pel said. "Dan, bring my suitcase."

The carnival man picked it up and set it down. Pel unclasped the locks of the cheap fibre bag, and they all heard a long-drawn sigh. Micklewitz stood up and stretched himself as the lid was raised. Pel put his hands under the midget's armpits and lifted him out. He said, "Did you get it, Mick?"

"Every word. He said he killed *Renie* Maroni."

Salvi started forward. "*Renie!*" he cried. "Now I remember, Pelham. The thing I couldn't recall about the telephone message. The voice whispered, 'It's *Renie* speaking. Come down quick.' *Renie!* No one ever called her that." He looked savagely at Rorke. "No one but you. I remember, now, that's what you called her in my tent at the showgrounds."

"It's a rotten frame-up," Rorke shouted. "Who's going to take the word of a bunch like this?"

Linley ignored the question. Instead he asked Rorke, "What made you come here to-night?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Rorke retorted angrily. "I believe in tailing 'em up. When I heard the armless wonder had shifted her traps down here, I wondered. I thought I'd drop in and ask a few things."

"I see." The detective turned to Estelle. "You should have told me you had moved," he said, and then asked Rorke, "When did you find out she was here?"

"Yesterday," Rorke said. "They're in cahoots—little Pel and the armless dame. It's a love nest, Linley." He turned to the sword-walker. "And how do you like that, Salvi?" He turned to Linley again. "They were all in it, if you ask me. They're all trying to shield someone. Can't you see—"

Linley said coldly, "Estelle doesn't live in this flat. It's been closed ever since the Maroni girl died. I arranged for it to be opened and the fire set and for Estelle to move in only a couple of hours ago. You came here, Rorke, in response to a letter Estelle addressed to Joseph Gregory. We've got your prints on the proof of a card Speel the printer set up."

"It's another lie," Rorke exclaimed savagely. "Where is it? Show me this precious proof."

"He burned it," Pel said, "as I thought he would. It doesn't matter. Mr Linley already had the prints and a photostat."

"I've never spoken to Speel in my life," Rorke cried. "I wouldn't know him if I saw him."

"No?" Linley said evenly. "Maybe not. You got someone else to call there for you. She fixed

up the box address for you, too. We got another set off the proofs—Josephine Gamin's. She's been running a lingerie business under another name, digging out information about silly women so you could blackmail 'em together. You'll remember she's already done three years for the same racket."

"I tell you it's a frame-up," Rorke reiterated, his eyes blazing. "And you're in it, Linley. You're jealous of me."

Estelle went to the mantelshelf and moved the clock. "I put the letters where you told me, Pel. They're gone."

Pel said, "He found them, as we intended. I bet they're in his pocket now. Maybe there's one from Sam Kitching among 'em."

Carey went behind Rorke, and suddenly grabbed his arms and held him while Pel dived into his coat pocket. "Gee," the showman said, "how I love doing this!"

"Here they are," Pel said to Linley, who had been kicking the coals in the fire. "You can let him go, Dan." He went on, "Don't worry, Rorke. There's no money for Mr Gregory in 'em. We just faked 'em up."

Linley said, "You've got a lot to answer, Rorke. We'd better see the chief. I'm going to tell him I think you were forcing Rena Maroni to blackmail Skin Rogers and, when she wanted to quit, you killed her."

"Or," Pel put in, "Rorke killed her because of something Salvi told her."

He turned his eyes on Rorke. "You wanted to get rid of both of them, so, after you killed her, you cleaned up a bit, wiped the door key clean, I guess, and left it on the outside. Then you rang Salvi, making him think Rena was speaking. You knew that would bring him, and that he'd open the door. You never thought of the key coming away in his fingers."

"What key?" Rorke shouted, and added desperately, "One of you murdered the dame and threw the key away."

Pel shook his head. "No," he said. "I found the key in Sapolio's flat, on the floor, where you and Salvi fell when Wang went for you. I thought Salvi might have dropped it, but I wasn't sure. I had a hunch that something was wrong, so I hid the key under a board in Sapolio's tomb. I guess," he added sadly, "we can dig it out now."

"Lies and guesswork," Rorke said. "It's crazy. It doesn't make sense. I never saw the girl till she was dead."

As he glared round at them, an inquiring head came round the door. "I thought I heard someone," Ricketty said, and looked about him blandly. "I was just goin' up to see poor Mrs Sapolio and—Why!" His eyes fell on Rorke, and he turned excitedly to Pelham. "Pel, that's the chap I saw on Billiga sidin'—the bloke that ran away with Paul Maroni's kid."

Suddenly Rorke's hand dropped to his pocket. "Get over there!" he said, grimly motioning with

his gun. "Keep your hands up!" He darted a nasty look at Estelle. "You excepted, of *course*. I guess you got a car downstairs, Linley. Well, I'll use it, thanking you very much. It'll look funny in the papers—'Get-away in Police Car'." He backed to the door into the passage.

"Remember what I told you, Mr Smart Alick Pelham. You can't get any extra for a second murder. I don't know why I don't kill you now."

"If you did," Pel said calmly, "it would be your third murder."

For a moment the gun wavered, then Rorke laughed bitterly. "Little Pel's at it again," he said, derisively. "What's it this time?"

"You killed Sapolio," Pel said. "You poisoned him. If he'd lived he could have proved that you were with Rena Maroni about the time she died. He saw you go into her flat. She'd been expecting Rogers, and when she opened the door she said, 'Mr Rogers', and when she saw it was you she added, 'oh'. They were the words Sapolio heard.

"In the tomb Sapolio saw you again and, thinking you were Rogers, asked you to help him. He was in agony. You put him in worse agony, you cold-blooded devil, but he lived just long enough to tell the world that you had poisoned him, although he didn't realize it."

He looked steadily at Rorke, and went on, "Carey! Salvi! Look at him. Look at him, Estelle! And you, Bella! He's a real gentleman, isn't he? Not riff-raff like us. Look at his nice

shirt and collar, and his tie! Particularly look at his tie, and the pin in it—the horseshoe pin. Before he died Sapolio wrote a few words to me. He was ashamed that, in his great pain, he had begged a little piece of ham fat. He had told me so many times that his fast was on the level. He was proud of his fasting. This is what he wrote to me, Rorke. I know it by heart.

“Dear Pel: To-night I have been a bad lad. The rules—I have broke him. Monsieur Rogers has give to me a little piece of fat from the ham because I have great pain in my inside. But only Monsieur Rogers know, Pel. He is good man. He will not tell. When I finish my starve I give to him a present. I buy him a new lucky pin for for his tie. I do not like this pin he wears with the horseshoe—”

“That’s all he wrote, but it was enough.” He looked right into Rorke’s eyes. “You killed him as you killed Rena Maroni.”

“And as I’m going to kill you,” Rorke added.

“I’m not scared of you.” Pel took a step forward.

“Get back, or I’ll plug you, you yellow ——” Rorke snarled.

“It’s you that’s yellow,” Pel said, contemptuously. “You’re frightened to kill in the open. You’re only a cheap, blackmailing crook who strangles women and poisons defenceless old chaps like Sapolio. I’d *like* you to be hanged. If you shoot me it’ll make a cert of it.”

Bella cried, "Pel, don't be crazy! He'll fire!"

All at once Carey made a move. His hand went to his pocket, but, before he could pull his gun, Rorke had fired at him. The carnival man crumpled against the big chair.

"You're next, Pelham," Rorke said, and pointed his revolver. Bella screamed, and covered her face with her hands.

Pel said, "You're afraid to do it."

"Oh, yeah?" Rorke raised the gun slightly. "Watch this. Right between the eyes."

Pel stared back at him as the gun lifted. It was almost shoulder-high when his eyes widened and his lips parted.

Rorke said, "Ah! Little Pel is getting scared."

Next moment the gun dropped, as two huge hands closed about his neck from behind. His eyes bulged. Choking sounds issued from his strangled throat. His body twisted helplessly, and then hung limp.

"Let go. Let *go!*" Linley shouted, and turned in desperation to Carey. "Make him let go."

But it was Pel who said commandingly, "*Wang!* Let go."

The giant's heavy eyelids lifted. His great brown eyes smiled at Pel. But he still held Rorke.

"Let—go." Pel demonstrated with his hands.

A slow, understanding smile spread over the Chinaman's face. Slowly the huge paws relaxed their hold, and fell away from Rorke's throat as if he had forgotten what he was doing or had lost

all interest. The body fell to the floor, and the giant stepped over it and walked to the fire. He sat down in the big chair with his back to them, gazing at the coals.

Linley knelt by Rorke's side and made a hasty examination. "He's done for," he said. "I think his neck's broken." He turned to Carey who was sitting up, leaning against the back of the big chair, Estelle kneeling beside him, Bella solicitous.

"It's nothing," the showman said. "The shoulder—"

Linley gave some instruction to Ricketty, who ran downstairs, anxious to be of service and to spread the news. Bella caught something in Carey's eye, and quickly moved away. Estelle bent nearer to the showman. "Are you sure you're all right, Dan?"

"Sure," he said. "It's a scratch."

She did not speak for a moment. Her eyes roved over his rugged face, then moistened. Her lips close to his, she whispered, "This is the only time I've *really* wished I had arms."

He grinned up at her. "Don't you worry, baby. I've got enough for two. You'll see."

A policeman and doctor were standing alongside Rorke's body when Salvi sidled between them and looked down at the dead man. He said bitterly, "So *that's* Gregory!" His voice grew in volume. "*Swine!*" he cried. "*Murderer!*" Before they knew what he was about he had lifted his foot and stamped the heel into the prostrate man's face again and again. "That for my father,"

he cried. "That for my mother. And this for me!"

They seized him and pulled him away.

"It's all right," he said, beginning to cry. "I can't do any more. He blackmailed my father till in the end he killed himself. He had a garage in the country, and he was a *good* man. Everybody said he was a good man. All except this swine, who knew he had done a stretch. He had something on him. My father told me. He told me where I should find him. He told me the address where he sent the money. I went there, and I found Rena. I wish I'd killed him." He wrenched himself free and, without another word, rushed from the room.

Pel looked at Linley. "I wouldn't bother with him," he said. "He'll never kill anyone. He likes to act."

Linley indicated the giant. "What the devil are we going to do with *him*?" he asked. "Look at him!"

The giant's arms were outstretched, one slightly higher than the other. They moved with the curious up-and-down motion which had so frightened Carey, the fingers outspread and curling. He looked toward Pel, eagerly, chuckling, his eyes expectant.

Pel said, "He's a child." He walked up to Wang and patted him on the shoulder. Then he thrust his hand into his own inner pocket and brought out a pack of cards. Expertly he did the

shower shuffle, letting the cards cascade from one hand to the other.

Wang made little gurgling noises; then, suddenly, his great cavern of a mouth opened. "Good," he said. "Wang like."

Linley passed a hand over his troubled brow. "I guess they'll just deport him," he said. "After all, he saved your life, Pel."

The midget Micklewitz was sitting disconsolately on the suitcase in which he had entered the room.

Linley said to him, "Just to clear things up, Micklewitz, and speaking as man to man, would you answer something?"

The midget rose. "If it will help," he said, gravely.

Linley said, "I think you saw Rena Maroni's body before Pelham and Carey broke into this room."

"Yes, sir," the midget said, his high treble contrasting strangely with the other's voice.

"Would you tell us about it?"

Micklewitz said, "I left the party to go to the lavabo. The one on Sapolio's floor was occupied, so I went downstairs to this floor, and to the one at the end of the passage. It is only a few steps. When I came out I forgot where I was. I walked down the hall and opened the door of this room. I was inside before I realized. I—I saw the girl lying on the floor, the light shining on her. I was so frightened, I ran out pulling the door after me. I wanted to shut out the sight."

Linley murmured, "The child's prints on the door." Then aloud to the midget, "But, when you saw Rena's dead body, you screamed?"

Micklewitz hung his head. "I am so ashamed," he said. "I was so very, very frightened." Tears came to his eyes.

Bella said hurriedly, "Have a cigarette, Mick."

Linley turned to Pel. "That was the woman's scream you heard."

The midget, more composed, said, "When I left the room I was in a panic. I ran back the way I had come—to the lavabo on the same floor. When I heard the others coming downstairs, I crept out at their backs while they were looking into this room. No one saw me."

Pel went back to the empty tomb early next morning. Delphine was waiting inside.

He said, "Sorry, Delph. What will you do?"

"Hubby's coming out soon," she said. "He wants me to learn the cats—sort of understudy. Gee! It'll be tame after what's happened here. Every time I look in there, Pel, I seem to see poor Mr Sapolio lying on his bed.

He kept his eyes on her for a moment.

"Why, what have I said?" she asked.

"Delphine," he told her, "you've said a mouthful. Stay here."

In five minutes he was talking to Linley. In eight he was interviewing Superintendent Graham.

"Nothing to stop it," Graham said. "It's just a matter of good taste."

"Oh, *that*," Pelham said. "I wouldn't know about that."

When he had gone Graham said to Linley, "Well, he did what we wanted—for nothing."

A few minutes later Pel was giving Speel, the printer, an order.

"Good boy," the old man said. "That's the stuff."

Pel said, "Graham hinted it weren't good taste."

Speel said, shrugging, "He gets in free everywhere. Anyway—helps Marie, don't it?"

Pel returned to the shop. To Delphine's surprise he said, "Get into the box, Delph. We're on our way." She obeyed and he took up his position on the outside.

He tapped the glass window. "On the inside," he said, "see the death chamber of Sapolio, the world's greatest fasting man. Pass quietly round the glass tomb. See the shattered glass, the tumbled bed, the wrecked furniture. For the small sum of sixpence you are privileged to see the glass prison from which the martyred Henri Sapolio smashed his way in his last tortured hour. Read about it in the papers, see it with your own eyes . . ."

A few people began to trickle through the door. He went over to Delphine and said, "To-morrow, Delph, wear all black, see? With a nice, neat white collar. Get me? Run down to that dancing academy and get hold of Cecil to-night. He's got to have a nice black arm-band, and we'll get a big

wreath and hang it at the end of the tomb. Oh, boy, when we get going!"

The showgrounds carnival was over, but there were queues lined up outside Sapolio's tomb. Marie had her friends to dinner before they set off on their country tours. There was a vacant seat at the head of the table and, on the wall above, a huge photograph of Sapolio decorated with black streamers. Beneath was a big bowl of arum lilies. A printed panel beneath the picture read:

Henri Sapolio
The World's Greatest Starving Man
Died at his Post June ——.

Dan Carey said, "Let's drink to a great showman."

They lifted their glasses silently, and drank.

Marie wiped away a tear. She said bravely, "Allez, allez! Potage Sapolio! Henri 'e use say, 'You mus' eat 'im when 'e's *veree* 'ot'."

They drank noisily from their spoons.

Marie turned to Pel, who had the seat of honour on her right. "You know somet'ing, Pel?" she said. "To-day I 'ave a letter from Monsieur Roger. 'E say keep zee two 'undred and start le Cafe Sapolio."

Suddenly the professor sprang to his feet. "I have a great idea, Maric." He waved his soup spoon towards the large picture of the fasting man.

"I tell you what I do. I will make a beautiful stencil of Henri's head." He turned to Bella who was sitting next to him, and turned her gently round. Demonstrating with the soup spoon, he said, "We will put it just here, between the shoulder blades. The very best position."

Marie beamed at him. "I t'ink that is a lovely thought, professor. Merci, Bella."

Soon they were busy wiping the bottom of their soup plates with chunks of bread. They were very common people.

THE END.

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